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Kent Kasson, the Preacher Sport.

Never before had there been a crowd so thoroughly worked up, so full of strong excitement, fierce indignation and open resentment. And all this over a private match-race sandwiched between the regular events as down on the Association programme.

A partial explanation may be found in the fact that the gray stallion, Silver King, was Denver born and trained, while his owner, Barry Nash, was likewise a native of the Queen City of the Plains.

But only partial.

Men who were known as "good losers" from ocean to ocean, gave their voices to swell the storm of angry protest with which the judges' stand was now assailed, and such men never posed as "kickers" unless something far more precious than money was at stake.

In the first heat with The Dodger at the pole, Silver King had astonished his backers by frequently breaking, although he was noted far and near for his honest trotting, his level head and even temper.

His driver made the excuse that Silver King was "rank," but that he surely would settle down in the next heat, when all would be over but shouting.

The shouting came, but in a fierce burst of rage against the driver, who surely had "lost his head," or worse. Twice, at the half, and the third quarter, he had carried Silver King "all over the track," pulling the good horse nearly double, ostensibly in the effort to steady him, but to all unprejudiced witnesses, the gray stallion was "sawing wood" at a winning gait, and asked for but ordinary driving to have taken the heat with all ease.

Instead of this, he barely escaped having the distance flag fall in his face, losing him both heat and race.

"It's—it's—just *awful!*" exploded an odd-looking spectator, brandishing a baggy umbrella with one hand, while the other mopped his heated face with a faded bandanna.

"It's *damnable*—nothing shorter!" savagely declared his nearest neighbor, Martin Todd by name, turning away from the inner rail, against which he had been leaning, to come face to face with the stranger, who dropped both umbrella and kerchief to clasp those sinewy hands.

"Thank you—ever so much, my dear sir! Say it again, and say it for me! Say it twice! Say it a dozen times, if—Eh?"

Martin Todd jerked his hands free, scowling suspiciously into that bearded face, the spectacled eyes of which seemed full of fire.

"What is it to you what I say? Haven't I a right to swear if—"

"Exercise that right, my dear sir! Swear, and keep on swearing until you have done full justice to the subject! If I only could! If I only might! But you—you are not a professor?"

"I wish I was a judge, for just five minutes! I don't know who you are, sir, and don't care a curse, but—"

"Kasson, Kent Kasson, missionary-at-large, my dear sir."

Martin Todd burst into a harsh laugh at this self-introduction, and the odd-looking missionary flushed a bit as he read that half-quizzical, half-contemptuous gaze.

"You think a man of my cloth is out of place on a race course? I know it, and yet, are there no souls here that need saving?" meekly ventured he of the umbrella, stooping to recover his property.

"I know one that's past saving," muttered Todd, with a black frown as he glanced toward the driver and the owner of Silver King, who were slowly following the blanketed trotter as Silver King was led toward the stables.

Kent Kasson followed his eyes, and quickly caught his meaning. He cast a quick, shy glance around, then leaned toward an ear, to whisper:

"I hope you are right, dear sir! I do hope you're right! If he has a soul fit for saving, then—Oh, if I could throw off the weight of just ten years! If I was now, what I was then—wouldn't I?"

"Wouldn't you what?"

"Turn the atmosphere blue as indigo! Curse that rascally knave up-hill and down, around the corner and back again, then catch breath for another heat!"

Despite his intense chagrin and hot indignation, Martin Todd could not refrain from laughing at that whimsical exhibition. The missionary flung his long limbs about after the most reckless fashion, brandishing his umbrella until it knocked his well-worn silk hat from his head.

That catastrophe served to recall the stranger to his senses, and as he recovered his tide, he cast a shy, almost frightened glance around them, giving vent to a little sigh of relief as he found no one was taking particular notice of his eccentric actions.

"Thanks be for that! I oughtn't to have ventured, but when I heard one of the good old stock was to race, how could I help it? Truly it hath been written, the flesh is weak—very, very weak!"

Martin Todd was nothing if not blunt, and

that doleful groan only served to stir up the Old Adam in his bluff nature.

"If you've been staking missionary money on the wrong horse, why don't you hedge? There's room for one more lunatic, yonder, I reckon."

Kent Kasson glanced toward the betting booths, then murmured in a gently reproaching tone:

"You forget, dear sir, that I'm a missionary, who—"

"I wish I'd been one, just for to-day, if that title is a charm against betting."

"Then you stand to lose, on Silver King?"

"Only about five thousand. Not worth mentioning, is it?"

"Why not follow the advice you just professed me? Why not hedge?"

"Because I'd rather lose it honestly than win it through a fraud. Silver King can win, if let."

"And it's not too late for that winning, even yet, if you get a lively move on you, man!" impetuously cried the missionary, his eyes glittering back of their glasses like twin stars. "If you have no influence yourself with the judges, gather up those of your friends who have! Make a dead-set at those in authority. Demand a change of drivers, if not for the sake of your good money, for that of a worthy scion of the noblest racer that ever looked through a bridle! If you are a true-hearted sport, don't let shame and defeat cloud the fair record of grand old Wide-awake."

Martin Todd stared, as well he might. The meek, shy, awkward-seeming disciple was all on fire, now, and instead of flinching from that wondering gaze, he met it boldly with face and with tongue.

"Am I crazy, you want to ask? No, sir; but I was a sport before I came under conviction and turned preacher. I am still sport enough to make you this offer: Get the judges to put up an honest man behind Silver King, and if he don't win the race, even now, I'll agree to assume all your losses on old Wide-awake's descendant."

"You will?"

"Even I," bowed the stranger, then adding, with a soft chuckle: "My first public sermon was on the text 'Bring good out of evil,' and I'm still of that opinion. Who knows? If these rascally tricksters are upset in their unholy schemes, may they not be brought to realize that all is vanity and vexation of spirit? May they not—what say?"

"You honestly mean it?"

"On the word of an old sport, I mean every word of it, sir."

"And if the change is made, and Silver King wins?"

"You'll win, and I'll have the satisfaction of knowing that the grand old horse my father bred—Wide-awake, king of them all!—has not been disgraced through one of his best descendants."

"But—if he should lose? The race is three-in-five, and—"

"He can't lose, unless he has to beat his own driver, as well as the other two in the race. I know the breed. I know the horse, though I never clapped eyes upon his shape until this very day. I say he can't lose, with anything like a fair chance to win. And so—money is the true test of faith, from a sporting point of view, dear sir," as he resumed his smooth, almost meek manner of speech. "It may be sinful, viewed from the pulpit, but—it's human nature, for all that!"

Martin Todd gazed keenly into that face for a few moments, vainly essaying to read what might lie beneath the surface. He rather prided himself on his knowledge of human nature, but for once he was forced to admit himself baffled. Saint or sinner? True man or canting fraud?

On the spur of the moment he could not decide, and it was more with the intention of shaking off an unwelcome parasite than in hopes of effecting the warmly urged change of drivers, that the old sport hastened away in the direction of the stables, where he could see the gayly blanketed racers being slowly walked to and fro by their grooms and attendants.

Hard by where Silver King was being judiciously "cooled out," his owner and the driver were slowly moving to and fro, engaged in earnest conversation, and unheeding the awkward-seeming figure close at his heels. Martin Todd pressed near enough the others to catch the words:

"You saw it for yourself, boss; the King is clean off his balance, and every time I'd give him his head, he'd lose it."

"But he was all right last night, and seemed all right this morning," said Barry Nash in husky, far from steady tones.

"I know it, and that's what locoos me! That's why I told you not to worry over the first heat. I felt dead sure he'd settle down and take the next three right off the reel. Instead of that—but you saw how rank he acted, boss."

Barry Nash paused, to stare moodily at the gray stallion under discussion. Silver King showed no signs of worry or evil temper now, and the most critical eye could find no fault with the manner in which he was rallying from the effects of that disastrous second heat.

"He seems all right, don't you think, Fitch?"

"Right as a fiddle, boss, and fit to race for a crown, if he'd only take the notion. But—he just won't do it, sir! The devil's in him, bigger'n a flour barrel, and I can't get it out, try my level! It's enough to make a man cuss his great-grandmother for ever getting married!"

"I wouldn't mind it so much, only—curse the money at stake!" exclaimed Nash, with fierce emphasis in voice and gesture. "I wanted to win, for the honor of it! Now—what had I best do, Fitch?"

"There's only one show that I can see, sir: hedge on The Dodger before they ring drivers up for the next heat."

Thus far Martin Todd had listened in silence, though his hot rage was urging him to speak out in plain terms. But before he could fairly school his tongue, the task was taken from him by the self-styled missionary, Kent Kasson, who gave his ancient umbrella an emphatic flourish as he sharply enunciated:

"I can give you better advice than that, young man!"

He pushed past Martin Todd, confronting the others: Barry Nash with a cold stare of surprise, Hiram Fitch with a scowl of ugly suspicion as his strong jaws set in bull-dog fashion.

"He says hedge," continued the stranger, nodding toward the driver, then rapping his own bosom with the umbrella handle, "but I say don't! Put up a man who knows the first principles of driving, and Silver King will do the rest! He comes of a winning strain, and I—"

Hiram Fitch cut him short with a savage oath, then demanded:

"And who the devil are you, to come sneaking around honest men with your dirty hints and back-capping?"

CHAPTER II.

BEFORE THE JUDGES.

As he made his fierce demand, the burly driver clinched his fists and lifted them menacingly, taking a step forward as though nothing would suit him better than to add actions to words. But Kent Kasson showed no signs of fear for himself, and though his hands went up, it was in protest against such unseemly speech, rather than to defend himself against personal injury.

"Swear not, lest thou be damned in turn, rash mortal!" he croaked, in hollow tones.

"Add not to thy manifold sins by taking—"

Hiram Fitch plainly meant mischief in his hot rage, but before he could take the leap for which he was crouching, bluff Martin Todd interfered. With one hand he thrust the missionary back, while the other gave the driver a warning sign.

"Dip lightly, Hi Fitch! This isn't the time or place for a sparring match, but if you can't get along without one, climb me, will you?"

The driver recoiled a bit, growling in sullen tones:

"What right has an infernal gray like him to come sneaking 'round here with his dirty slurs? What right—"

"You're a sweet-scented duck to prate of right, Hi Fitch! Go get a stable-boy to scrape you down and cool you off!"

"And I'll pray that you may be brought to see the errors of thy present ways, poor fellow! Even yet there is time for repentance, and while the light continues to burn—"

"I'll burn you, if you don't come off!" harshly interrupted Fitch.

"Go look after the King, Fitch," coldly spoke up his employer, then facing Martin Todd, he added:

"I'll see you later, Mr. Todd, if you have any particular business with me, but just now—Well, I've got rather more than my hands full, as it is!"

He broke off with a smile which was plainly forced. He was too manly to openly show his hurts, but one who knew him well could not help seeing how deeply he was affected by the unexpected turn affairs were taking that day.

"That's more than you can say for your pockets, Barry, unless Fitch does a heap sight better than he has this far!" bluntly said Todd.

"Poor fellow!" with an unconscious sigh, as his gaze followed that slouching figure toward Silver King. "It cuts him almost as deeply as it does me, but he's done his level best to win."

"For those who back The Dodger, yes."

Nash gave a start at that crisp interjection, and faced the speaker with a dark frown of indignation.

"I haven't the honor of your acquaintance, sir, but permit me to say that you—are mis-taken."

"Oh, don't mind him, lad. He's a bit of a crank, I do reckon, but, all the same, he's shot mighty close to the bull's-eye this round. If Fitch isn't playing you double, then he's turning crazy! Drive! He couldn't drive a sick kitten for me, after that last heat!"

"The horse was to blame, not Fitch."

"Don't you slander the horse, Barry Nash! I

never did like that rascal, and now I know he's worse than a fraud. The gang has bought him up, sure as fate!"

"You have no right to bring such a charge, Mr. Todd, unless you have ample proof to back up your words."

"Proof?" echoed the indignant sport. "That last beat furnished proof enough to condemn a score better men than Hiram Fitch! I tell you, Barry Nash, there's only one thing for you to do, and that is to put up another driver behind the King."

"The horse can win, if he only will."

"He surely can, if the driver helps, not hinders!" harshly cried Kent Kasson, unheeding, possibly unseeing the return of that very driver in his excitement.

"You will have it, eh?" growled Fitch, with a furious oath, plunging forward, sending out a bony fist as he made his rush.

With a deft sweep of his umbrella, the missionary warded off that blow, then caught the driver by both wrists, "giving him the foot" at the same time. A vigorous wrench and heave, ably seconded by that foot, whirled Fitch to earth. He fell on the broad of his back, and before he could rally from the shock of his fall, Kent Kasson was seated on his body, a knee pinioning each arm, one hand gripping his collar, while the other waved an admonitory finger above his flushed face.

"The wicked standeth on slippery places, brother, and pride goeth before a fall! He who lifteth hand in anger against one of the Lord's anointed, ought first to make sure—Must I put on the grip, brother?"

Hiram Fitch gave vent to a savage yell, which started a goodly number of stable-boys and grooms toward the spot, and there was a fine prospect for a row which might end in a tragedy; but it was spoiled by the prompt action of Martin Todd, backed by Barry Nash.

One jerked the missionary off his fallen adversary, the other helped Fitch to his feet, sending him away with a stern reproof which he saw fit to accept in sullen silence.

"Say you'll ask for a change of drivers, Nash," hurriedly urged Todd. "You must do it, if only in justice to the King's backers."

"I'll never do that, and you're no friend of mine if you ask it again. What! brand Hiram Fitch as a fraud? Never, sir! I'd rather lose my last dollar, ten times over!"

"Is there naught to be said of the dollars of other people, brother?" gravely asked the missionary.

Barry Nash made an impatient gesture as he glanced toward the excited trackmen, now gathered about the insulted driver.

"Take the crazy fool away, Todd, unless you want to kick up a free fight on the grounds! Take him away, I say, man!"

Martin Todd was no fool, whatever might be said about his oddly-formed acquaintance, and quickly recognizing the impending peril—and the "Hey, Rube!" at a circus row can hardly gather a more reckless, dangerous crowd together than can the well-known slogan of the race-track—he caught Kasson by an arm, burying him across the field toward the greater, but more peaceful crowd near the judges' stand.

"Come along, man!" he muttered, harshly. "Don't you know what a cry like that means?"

"Don't I, brother?" with a grim, short laugh, as his long legs kept time with those of the portly sport. "Razors, knives, clubs and loaded whips! But—surely you will not give over the good fight for right against wrong? You will not aid and abet these vile tricksters, by maintaining meek silence while they rake in their foully won ducats?"

"What else can I do, man?"

"Kick, with a capital K! Force the judges to put up another driver! Spoil the Egyptians, even as they think to spoil their betters!"

"The lad would never forgive me that! And—I knew his father!"

"Who is surely turning in his grave this moment! Would you bring shame upon that grave, by letting his son even tacitly consent to such a bitter fraud? Oh, brother! had I a thousand tongues—"

"Holy smoke! One is enough, and too mighty much!" spluttered Todd, dropping that arm, now that they were mingling with the crowd.

Kent Kasson did not attempt to follow the portly sport, though a shrewd smile came into his face as he saw Martin Todd pressing his way up to the judges' stand, which was already closely besieged by a goodly number of indignant bettors.

Well content to leave the matter in such hands, Kasson aimlessly pushed his way through the crowd and across the track, to where a dense mass of coaches and carriages were packed, for the most part occupied by ladies, whose gay toilettes lent color and picturesqueness to the scene.

Whether through accident, or led by some as yet unguessable purpose, the odd-looking stranger came to a brief pause close behind a tall, fashionably dressed man, who was just then accosted by a burly, red-bearded fellow, who looked the gambling sport all over.

"Can't get better than five to one on The Dodger, Prince, and even then it's begging for a

bet!" were the first words Kasson caught with sufficient distinctness to mentally record.

"Take everything that comes, Ferguson. It's a lead-pipe cinch!" the other replied, with a low, mocking chuckle. "Go harvest it all, pardner!"

Ferguson hurried away, and the missionary followed in the same direction, using umbrella point and elbows to make a passage for himself through the densely packed crowd.

Meanwhile Martin Todd and others had done their work so well that one of the track stewards was sent to Barry Nash, with a request for his presence in the judging-stand.

His face pale but stern and hard set, the young sport complied with that request, but there was an air of almost defiance in his bow to the judges, with whom he was well acquainted, one and all.

"You sent for me, gentlemen," he said, coldly. "What is your pleasure, if I may ask?"

The trio interchanged glances, and there was a brief pause. It was a far from pleasant duty which had presented itself, but one which had to be faced, for all that.

The eldest of the judges took the initiative, and briefly stated the main facts: that there were open complaints made that the driver of Silver King was doing his best to make his horse lose, in place of winning.

"Whoever brings that charge, lies!" sternly said the owner. "Hiram Fitch is an honest man, and has done his level best to take each and every heat, according to my instructions."

"But he has failed, and most lamentably, my dear sir."

"For that, blame the horse, not his driver."

"We are trying to fasten the blame where it rightly belongs, Mr. Nash, and as a gentleman you ought to co-operate with us. We have decided to take down Fitch, and put up another driver, who may—"

"I protest against such an outrage, gentlemen! I'll never consent to brand an honest man who has only his good name as capital! I'll draw Silver King rather than permit such shameful injustice!"

There was a brief silence after this passionate outburst. The judges interchanged glances, as though thus seeking courage in unanimity, and presently the eldest judge slowly, gravely spoke:

"You are too greatly excited to weigh your words, Mr. Nash, else they would never have been spoken. As for drawing Silver King, we cannot consent to such a rash step on your part."

"Gentlemen, you say I am hot: I admit it. I'd be less than human if I wasn't hot, when such a wrong is even proposed. I'll win the race, if horse and driver can do it, but Hiram Fitch shall be that driver, or the race is already at an end, so far as we are concerned!"

"You forget yourself, Mr. Nash. This is an Association track, and all races on it come under the Association rules. You've raced enough to know what that implies, sir?"

"This is a private match."

"But on our track, and subject to our rules."

"And such being the case, it is part of our sworn duty to protect the public," coldly interjected another one of the judges.

"Do you dare even hint at crookedness on my part, sir?"

"No, but we have good reason to believe that your driver is working in the interest of the pool-box, and such being the case, we have decided to unseat him, and to put up another man behind Silver King."

"I'll never consent to that! I'll never listen to—"

"The case has passed out of your hands, Mr. Nash, and until the last heat is lost and won, Silver King is in our hands. If you are wise, you will submit with good grace to what you are powerless to hinder."

"And if the new man should lose, that very fact will clear both owner and driver: don't you see, Barry?"

Martin Todd muttered this sentence, hoping to calm the indignant sport, but his words were passed by without recognition, even.

White with rage, Barry Nash faced the judges, to declare:

"I'll never submit to the howling of a few kickers! I'll draw my horse, and let the race go by default, sooner!"

"That action will subject you to expulsion from every Association track between ocean and ocean, Mr. Barry Nash. Our decision has been arrived at only after careful judgment. It will surely stand as given. The bell will ring in just ten minutes, and if, at the expiration of the usual grace, your horse is not on the track, ready to score under a new driver of our selection, Silver King, Hiram Fitch, and you, Mr. Nash, will be expelled from all Association tracks, according to the rules made and provided for just such cases as this!"

He seemed to grope his way like one with imperfect vision, and but for the hand-rail which guarded the stairs, he would have fallen down the steep flight which led to the ground.

Not until fairly clear of the stand did he seem able to breathe with anything like freedom, and even then, so dazed was he by this unexpected blow, that he stared vacantly into the face of a gentleman who hastened to join him, without hearing the words that passed his lips, or even recognizing that more than familiar countenance, at first.

"What sort of cock-and-bull story is this they're spreading about, Barry, old man?" repeated the one whose arm now slipped familiarly through that of the young horseman.

"I don't—You, is it, Hamilton?"

That recognition seemed to recall the scattered senses, and for the first time since hearing the decision of the judges, Barry Nash looked and acted like his ordinary self.

"It's a cursed outrage, but what can I do?" he harshly asked, yielding to that controlling arm for the moment.

"Surely you'll never—They're not going to take Hi Fitch down?"

"They say it's that or—expulsion!"

It was a bitter word to utter, and the tone in which it finally came, spoke volumes.

A keen glitter leaped into the blue eyes of the blonde sport, but a neatly gloved hand rose to cover his mustached lips, as though to mask a cough, and there was nothing save hot indignation in his face as he spoke again:

"Outrage? Well, I should remark! I never heard of one its equal, and if I owned Silver King—You kicked, of course, Barry?"

"Like a bay steer! But what good? They've got the bulge, and it's knuckle down or be blacklisted on all Association courses!"

"But, man alive, it's robbery—rank robbery! They'd ought to know the horse better than to put up a strange driver, just as he's settling down to his knitting! Why, not to mention others, I've got enough up on the King to buy half the judges in Colorado!"

Prince Hamilton spoke with strong fervor, but his words passed unheeded save by the one directly at his side. The excited hum of human voices, stilled during the consultation in the judges' stand, had broken forth with ten-fold vigor, now that a hint of the truth had leaked out.

Some were cheering in wild glee at having their hot protests paid heed to, while others were as loudly protesting against any change in drivers being made at that late stage of the race.

In this excitement, no attention was paid to the owner of Silver King and his fashionably attired companion, and Barry Nash, his recently pale face flushing purple with indignant shame as he caught a few of the many uncomplimentary allusions, blindly yielded to the guidance of Prince Hamilton.

With the skill which comes from long usage, the blonde sport made a way for them both through the crowd, crossing the quarter-stretch and leaving the track itself behind them. Almost before he realized as much, Barry Nash found himself brought up beside a neatly-appointed turn-out, in which a single figure sat, a blaze of silk and lace and flashing jewels.

Off came his hat, and he mumbled something as he bowed. He was vaguely conscious that this gayly-attired lady had called to them, but his wits were still too utterly confused for further understanding.

"Please see if you can't move him, Miss Ferguson," hastily spoke up the Prince, as Hamilton was quite generally termed in a certain class of Denver's society. "Beg him to insist on keeping Fitch up, for—"

"What! the judges surely will not listen to you' howling mob of—is it 'kickers'?"

Miss Mattie Ferguson began with crisp directness, but as she brought out that conclusion, it was with a pretty hesitation, a roguish smile, and an uplifting of a daintily-gloved hand, just too late to smother that bit of expressive slang.

"A drove of mules isn't in it, my dear!" declared the Prince, with a gesture of intense disgust. "And a change of drivers now, means sure defeat for the King!"

"Then—please, may I speak, Mr. Nash?"

"This is a free country, Miss Ferguson," bowed Nash, a grim, unpleasant smile contorting his features an instant later, as he added: "Free to all, save men like myself, that is!"

"Then, do please let them put up another driver! I've got oceans of bets placed that The Dodger wins, and I do so hate to lose!"

"This, from you, Miss Mattie!" reproachfully ejaculated the Prince. "And you such an enthusiastic admirer of the King and his—ahem!"

"And his driver—just so!" deftly supplemented the lady, with a bright smile upon her almost beautiful face. "I do admire the King. I could actually love him, if I dared."

"If you dared, Miss Ferguson?" echoed Barry Nash, feeling that common politeness demanded some speech from his lips, but feeling too utterly disgusted with all the world, just then, to care much what words came first.

"If I dared, dear Mr. Nash," her voice lowering, her head bending a little nearer the young sport. "You've heard of the evil eye, of course?

CHAPTER III.

A CHANGE OF DRIVERS.

AFRAID to trust himself longer, Barry Nash turned from the judges to leave the stand, his face white as marble, but with streaks of blood marking his eyeballs.

Kent Kasson, the Preacher Sport.

Well, I possess it, greatly against my will. Let me fix my affections on any one person or thing, and straightway harm comes to him or to it. So—hoping that my going against him would bring Silver King to the front, a winner, I've taken every offered bet against him!"

A look of gratitude came into the troubled eyes of the young sport, and his fingers closed warmly over that dainty glove for a few moments, his head bowing and his lips lightly brushing the fingers as the hand was withdrawn.

Miss Ferguson flashed a swift, bright glance over Barry's head to the face of Prince Hamilton. He frowned, then shook his head sternly. She made a little mouth in return, but all this had vanished when Nash lifted his gaze to her face.

"You're a true friend, Miss Mattie, and some day I may be able to thank you as I ought. Now—I'm all broken up!"

There was a little bustle near the carriage, and a burly, red-bearded man forced a passage for himself to their side. His face betrayed strong excitement, and without apparently noticing the others, he bluntly addressed Barry Nash with the question:

"What's all this I hear, Nash?"

"Confusion worse confounded, I should say, brother David," lightly spoke the lady, from her carriage. "Why will men turn themselves into howling lunatics, just because everything does not come their way?"

"They say, you're going to put up a new driver behind Silver King," persisted the newcomer, only noticing his sister by an impatient toss of his fiery-hued head.

"They lie, then," coldly said Nash.

"It's the judges, rather, Ferguson," explained Hamilton. "They've given ear to the kickers, and—I only wish the horse was mine!"

"What would you do if he was?" moodily asked Nash.

"Kick over the combination!" came the almost fierce reply. "It's worse than highway robbery, if they take down Hi Fitch to put up an untried driver! It's throwing away the last chance of all those who have placed their money in good faith on the King! I'd stand up for my rights as owner, even though—"

"It's the judges, then, not Nash?" asked Ferguson.

"Don't insult a gentleman by taking him for either fool or knave, Dave!" sharply reproved the Prince.

Ferguson began scratching his head, the action tilting his hat far over his eyes. His thick lips protruded in a silent whistle, and his strong but coarse face betrayed deep perplexity, as he muttered:

"The judges, eh? Then, if *they're* at the bottom of it kicking can do no good, that I can see!"

"Why not?" almost savagely demanded Hamilton. "If the King was my horse, I'd say who should or who should not handle the ribbons over him, or else—"

"Or else be expelled from all Association tracks; for that's just what it amounts to!" declared Ferguson, with a grim, hard smile. "That might save your good money, Hamilton, for all bets would be declared off; but—"

Miss Ferguson gave a little cry of dismay, her hand once more seeking the arm of the dejected sport as she spoke:

"Oh, you'll not suffer *that*, Mr. Nash? Just think! I've ever so many bets, just oceans of them! And if I can't win, I'd rather lose! Say that you will not kick—object to—oh, dear! What is it I want to say, anyway?"

Barry Nash forced a smile, but it lay only on the surface, and fled almost as soon as born. He caught sight of a tall figure pressing toward them, and the gray-hued sash proclaimed a steward of the course.

"My saying amounts to worse than nothing, Miss Ferguson. The judges have taken control of my horse, and I can only submit, or be still worse disgraced!"

There was no reply, for just then the official came up, gravely saluting the lady, then speaking to Nash in low, respectful tones:

"The judges have sent me for your final decision, Mr. Nash. Will you agree to the change of drivers, or must still sterner measures be taken?"

"By which you mean?"

"I am only a mouthpiece, sir, and, believe me, a most unwilling one at that," earnestly said the steward. "Don't bear hard feelings toward me for simply doing my duty."

"And that duty is—out with it in plain English, sir!"

"To state that another driver goes up, to win or to lose, else the full penalty will be exercised against Silver King, his driver, trainer, and owner."

"In other words, we will all be black-listed!"

The steward bowed, gravely. It was a painful position for him, as his honest countenance showed, but Barry Nash was in no humor just then to show gratitude or mercy. In low but stern tones he spoke:

"My father's name is on record as one of the gentlemen who first incorporated this track."

For his name's sake, I will not invite expulsion. Tell the judges—I wish I might call them gentlemen judges, but that would be a base lie on the face of it!"

"I may say, then, that you consent to a change of drivers?"

"Wait: you brought a disagreeable message, so you'd ought to be able to carry one back. Tell the judges that I wash my hands of the whole affair, so far as the present is concerned. Tell them to put up a tool of their choice, and add my prayer that the King may break his inferior neck for him!"

The steward bowed, and turned to beat a retreat, but Barry Nash kept him company, resolved to have his say out, then and there.

"Tell the judges, as well, that if harm comes to my horse through their arbitrary decision, I'll sue each and every one of them for his full value! Tell the judges—"

A surge of the excited crowd parted the two men, and Barry Nash left that fierce sentence incomplete.

He made no offer to return to those from whom he had parted, but drifted along to the railing which bordered that side of the track, lost in ugly broodings for the time being.

He was brought to his senses once more, by a shout of mingled wonder, anger and derision, and clearing his misty eyes, he caught sight of Silver King jogging up the track, with the new driver in the sulky.

And such a spectacle as that driver presented! Never before had anything like it been seen on a public race-course!

"The devil!"

In one sense of the word, Barry Nash was fully justified in giving vent to that ejaculation of angry disgust. And yet, considering his self-avowed avocation in life, that driver more properly deserved the title of Satan's adversary: for it was none other than Kent Kasson, the preacher, and ex-sport!

With spectacles firmly seated over his nose, with rusty silk hat pulled over the back of his head even to his ears, Kent Kasson drove up the course, grave as the Sphinx, solemn as a mute at a funeral!

CHAPTER IV.

THE PREACHER SPORT.

A FRIENDLY hand clasped Barry Nash's shoulder, and a half-apologetic voice entered his ear:

"Don't lay up hard feelings, lad, but I was a close friend to your father, and I want to be one to your father's son."

The young sport shrank off that touch as though there was contagion in it. His pale face flushed hotly, and still hotter anger flashed in his black eyes. But before he could find words, Martin Todd added:

"I hate to see you being gouged so shamefully by false friends, my boy, and for that reason, more than care for my own pocket, I took—"

"Save your breath, Mr. Todd," harshly interrupted the younger man, his voice trembling with poorly suppressed anger. "This is *your* work, more than that of any other person. You're the chief kicker. You have brought this bitter humiliation upon me, yet you dare come to me with hypocritical whines and—enough, I say! I'll never forget, never forgive! And if it wasn't for your gray hairs, I'd thrash you like a dog!"

"Easy, boy!" warily muttered Todd, with a quick glance around them. "If you wasn't your father's son—but let that pass. If you deny my right to protect that father's son from being skinned by a pack of dirty tricksters, you surely can't blame me for taking steps to save my own good money?"

"I'd have paid your losses, ten times over! I'd rather lose every dollar I own in the world, than have this public shame put upon me!"

Rudely thrusting the portly sport aside, Barry Nash plunged into the crowd, making his way across the track to the inner circle, for the moment only thinking of hiding himself from his many friends, real or false.

His personal pride was intense. As he declared, he would far rather have lost his every dollar, than suffer the slightest stigma to become attached to his good name.

Cooler moments might convince him that the judges acted strictly within the letter of the law, and that no possible shame could attach itself to himself, but just now he was too savagely writhed to reason soberly.

Meanwhile the Preacher Sport was gravely attending to business, heeding not if he heard those wild jeers, taunts, witticisms, which pelted him from all sides. In that one respect, at least, he already proved himself a model driver.

It was through Martin Todd's urgent recommendation that Kent Kasson had been given the place taken from Hiram Fitch, but after the new driver was presented to the judges, it required the strongest urgings to keep them from retracting that commission, so totally unlike the regulation jockey was this tall stranger.

With no little anxiety Martin Todd watched each and every move made by his choice, but little by little his face cleared up as he saw how shrewdly the Preacher Sport was working, how kindly Silver King seemed to take to his new driver.

Apparently the driver up behind The Dodger had received his instructions to "rattle" the "gray," for he did all in his power to annoy and excite both horse and driver, without actually crossing the danger line of the track rules.

Time and again the pole horse made or caused a false start, coming to the wire far ahead of Silver King, or else pulling up whenever he saw that the gray stallion would reach the wire on anything like equal terms.

At length this trick was worn threadbare, and the starter gave the opposing driver warning to settle down to business, and to score with Silver King, under penalty.

Through it all, Kent Kasson, owl-like in his gravity, proved himself a true horseman by his skill in saving his horse, and Martin Todd gave an inward chuckle of growing content as he took silent notes.

Then the rivals came trotting down the stretch like two magnificent machines. The Dodger was an open length ahead as the wire was reached, but the Preacher Sport nodded for the word, and it was given.

"Go!" shouted one of the judges, and the third heat was on!

Under any circumstances that heat would have awakened intense interest, for if The Dodger could win this, the race was at an end: if he lost, the many backers of Silver King would still have another chance for their money.

But the charges of fraud, so openly made, so fiercely maintained; the change of drivers in the face of the King's owner's hot protest; the unusual appearance of that new driver; all this added to the excitement until every stride was watched with breathless interest.

And yet, divested of all these items, the heat in itself was one scarcely calculated to enthuse an every-day crowd.

Hugging the pole closely, trotting true and level, like one determined to win out of hand, The Dodger maintained the lead past the first quarter-pole, swinging into the straight stretch leading to the half, like a bit of admirable machinery. And yet, nearly all the cries and exclamations had Silver King for their center.

"Look at him trot! It's another horse entirely!"

"All he wanted was a fair chance, and now he's got it!"

"Silver King forever!"

"Whooray for the 'gray'! Gray hoss, an' gray driver!"

Like clockwork both horses were trotting as they passed the half-mile post, and one could hardly believe Silver King was the same ugly, hot-headed brute Hiram Fitch had done battle with, less than an hour before.

Around the upper turn swung the racers, still maintaining their relative positions, for Kent Kasson was taking no wild chances so early in the game. He had felt his horse, and knew that Silver King could outfoot The Dodger on the home-stretch. But—would he be permitted to win the heat?

There was scant time to ponder this ugly query, and Kent Kasson settled himself for the supreme test, now that the perfect course lay clear and free from obstructions ahead of the trotters.

Unless interference should come from that wildly excited crowd, he knew that the heat was at his mercy. And so—he went for it!

Taking Silver King well toward the outside, the Preacher Sport sent that nameless thrill along the lines, giving the mute signal to which every true horse responds so readily. Little by little the gap was closed, and yet never a word was spoken to the gallant gray, never a touch of the keen whip marred his glistening bide!

With both whip and voice The Dodger was urged, and right gallantly did the ebon racer respond to that call. But all in vain!

Amid deafening cheers, Silver King sped under the wire, an easy winner of the heat by an open length.

The Preacher Sport had redeemed the noble stallion's fame.

Not until the first turn was reached did Kent Kasson pull his horse down to turn. Right or wrong, he believed that an unscrupulous gang was working to beat the gray stallion, and he was far too shrewd to run any risk of a collision with The Dodger.

The very personification of awkward stiffness, the Preacher Sport jogged back to the wire, silently lifting his whip for permission to leave the sulky. It was given, and with slouching tread and stooping shoulders, the strange driver bore horse and owner company as they left the course.

For, so soon, Barry Nash had partially conquered his intense disgust for this officious stranger. The truly admirable exhibition of skill, doubtless seeming more remarkable for coming so soon after the suspicious behavior of Hiram Fitch, together with the true, honest trotting done by Silver King, his glorious favorite and friend, so calmed the hot-tempered sport that he made no show of irritation as Kent Kasson guardedly dropped into his ear the warning:

"All eyes open, young sir! They can't beat the King by fair trotting, but they may by trickery! Watch him with all your eyes, bro-

ther! For the sake of rare old Wide-awake, if not for the King's own!"

The Preacher Sport bore Silver King company to the usual spot, where grooms were ready to scrape down and cool out the trotter. One of those grooms, with outward exultation glowing in his eyes and his freckled face, hastened with a dripping sponge to wash out the animal's mouth; but before Silver King could get a drop of the moisture for which his heated throat was yearning, Kent Kasson snatched the sponge away, touched it to his nose, then, with a most unclerical ejaculation of anger, knocked the groom to earth!

He sprung upon the fellow, one fierce grip causing his jaws to fly apart, and the dripping sponge was crammed between those rows of yellow teeth: only for an instant. Then drawing back, Kasson sternly spoke to the amazed owner:

"Smell of that, will you, sir? Drugged! Now—watch your horse, I warn you again!"

Without pausing for further explanation, the Preacher Sport hastened back to the judges' stand, and saluting those officials, he produced the sponge for their examination, tersely explaining how it had entered his possession.

"Verily, brethren," he added, with a nasal twang which could not entirely disguise his earnestness, "Satan hath marshaled his hosts on this day, and sent them bither to—in other words, gentlemen, as one who takes a powerful interest in seeing right come out on top, I beg that you will have the entire track patrolled from start to finish, before you ring up the next heat!"

The sponge surely was drugged, as scent and taste both gave ample evidence, and one of the judges broke forth with hot suspicion against Barry Nash: If he had instigated this new outrage on the public, he should surely feel the heavy hand of the law!

"You must look further for the guilty ones, brethren," meekly but decidedly declared Kent Kasson. "Brother Nash may be hot of temper, but he is a gentleman, and worthy the loins from whence he sprung. I have torn the scales from his eyes, and he may be trusted to care for his noble horse. If you will have the track patrolled, gentlemen, I'll engage to win the next heats and the race!"

Leaving the medicated sponge with the judges at their request, the Preacher Sport left the stand, moving toward the not distant betting-stands; the many bookmakers had long since closed their lists, and now that ugly charges had been brought, of course they would not open others on the to-come heats.

Grave in outward seeming as a somnolent owl, the Preacher Sport passed from stand to stand, taking notes. Not a muscle of his face altered as recognition came his way, nor yet when he found that, almost without exception, every pool sold had The Dodger for a hot favorite at ominous odds, considering how easily Silver King had won the last heat.

For some little time Kasson played spectator, but then, to all seeming, the sporting blood which had been smothered by the austerity of the missionary, came to the surface, and he began buying pools on the non-favorite, giving the initials "K. K." at each asking for the name to be recorded on the tickets.

As customary when there is a heavy rush of betting, these tickets were permitted to accumulate on the clerk's desk for later redemption, but as each "second choice" was knocked down to "K. K.", the clerk whispered an evident warning to the auctioneer, for, as the Preacher Sport once more called forth those magic letters, he irritably demanded:

"Who may K. K. be, before going further?"

"Kweer Kuss!" called forth one witty member of the crowd, who had apparently been making a study of that peculiar figure, so oddly out of place in the betting ring.

A burst of laughter greeted this quaint yet appropriate title, but Kent Kasson never even cracked a smile as he used his umbrella to force a passage for himself.

"Laugh not, brethren, at an untimely jest which savoreth strongly of profanity," he croaked, in deep, hollow tones, as he thrust the baggy umbrella under an arm, the better to extract his fat wallet. "Queer I may seem in worldly eyes, but 'curse' I give no mortal license to dub me, even in rude mirth. Rather let it be recorded *Kool Kash!*"

The laugh turned to his side as the Preacher Sport paid for his tickets, and more than one kindly cheer followed the odd character as he left the ring, to hasten to the side of Barry Nash, to add yet another warning.

"Be doubly on thy guard, brother, for verily the men of Belial hath installed The Dodger hot favorite, even after this eye-opener!"

CHAPTER V.

THE PREACHER SPORT IN DEMAND.

So noiseless had been the approach of the missionary, that this touch and warning gave Barry Nash his first intimation of that return.

Turning quickly, his brows gathered with something of his first suspicion and instinctive dislike, but if Kent Kasson saw aught of this, he passed it by without further notice. Just then

he seemed to have thoughts only for Silver King and his prospective triumph.

"Tis true, brother, and being true, deserveth careful consideration, for what doth the shrewd if homely proverb say? When the rattler's tail begins to sing, look out for the end that holdeth the sting! And keener far than serpent's tooth are the wits of an ungodly crook in quest of his brethren's good ducats!"

The Preacher Sport punctuated his speech with his baggy umbrella, growing so emphatic in its use that once Barry Nash was forced to draw abruptly back, lest his head-gear come to grief through that wildly flourished weapon of offense.

Despite the service which Kent Kasson ha' so recently rendered him, through exhibiting Silver King in a more favorable light, the young sport could not conquer that feeling of repulsion, and that sentiment strongly tinged his abrupt demand:

"Who are you, anyway?"

If a douche of ice-water had been turned upon his heated person, a more complete change could hardly have come over the missionary. His head bowed, his shoulders grew rounder, his arms dropped limply at his side, and when he made reply, his voice was meekness personified:

"Who am I, brother?" he murmured, with a faint sigh and groan combined. "A dreadful backslider, whose only excuse for falling so utterly from grace is a pious wish to bring good forth from evil."

Wholly free from cant himself, and hating a bumbug as only a frank, honest and impulsive man can, Barry Nash felt his repulsion grow stronger instead of vanishing before that meek response.

It was his turn to grip an arm, and he did this with a vigor which might well have caused even a strong man to flinch, sternly repeating:

"Who and what are you, I say? Since you've thrust your nose into my affairs so deeply, I've a right to a plain, straightforward answer."

"Who am I?" meekly echoed the Preacher Sport, without resenting either grip or demand. "A brand plucked from the burning, as I fondly believed, but—a brand that is still smoking! What am I? A fugitive from Satan's grip, but just when I dared give thanks for my eternal emancipation, lo, and behold! those fingers of fire are clasping my heel, seeking to drag me back to never-dying flames!"

Barry Nash relaxed his grip, his lip curling with scorn as he said:

"Bah! you've learned your lesson poorly, stranger! I'm a greenhorn at play-acting, but, if I couldn't pan out purer stuff than that, I'd go put my head to soak!"

"In other words, you've set me down as a fraud?" asked Kent Kasson, but with a faint smile coming into his be-spectacled eyes!

"No, for you've saved me that trouble," bluntly retorted Nash.

"Would a fraud have taken so much trouble to clear a good horse from unmerited reprobation, brother?"

"Why not, if he had money staked on that horse? You've backed the King, of course?"

"Only since winning this beat, Mr. Nash," quickly replied the Preacher Sport, dropping his canting whine for the manner which really seemed most natural for him. "And then I invested more through pride in grand old Wide-awake than through covetousness."

"And you say The Dodger is still a hot favorite?"

"Too hot not to have some fire back of it, sir," came the quick, earnest response. "Look you, Mr. Nash: I've been through all this myself. In my blinder days, I was as ardent a sport as you are this day. And, like you, I thought only of winning on the square, with victory first, and money nowhere!"

"I thank you for that good word, at least," impulsively cried Nash, reaching for and giving a cordial grip to that gloved hand. "It comes all the more refreshing after being pelted with—never mind!"

"Don't mention it, brother. I can feel for you, but even to brighten you up, I wouldn't spice flattery with a lie. Now—a warning word in your private ear, brother.

"As I hinted, I've been through the mill, and like the inquisitive youth who monkeyed with the mule, I gained in wisdom what I lost in good looks! It was a rough, tough, costly lesson, but one which every honest sport must pay as his initiation fee—a lesson that taught me my worst enemies were precisely those who loudly proclaimed themselves my most ardent friends!"

"Is that a warning for me to fight shy of you?" asked Nash, with a grim smile. "For you are claiming to be a friend are you not?"

"By their works ye shall know them, brother, and by mine I am well content to stand or to fall in your estimation. Yet, dear brother, if a warning word from my poor lips could only open your eyes to the sin of gambling on—"

"Is that one of your pool-checks you've dropped?"

The Preacher Sport instinctively clapped a hand to his breast-pocket, in which those valuable tokens had been stowed away, at the same time casting a quick glance at the ground. Barry Nash gave a dry, meaning laugh that fully bared the trap, then curtly said:

"The judges put you in my sulky, sir, not into a pulpit."

"All right, brother," meekly bowed the missionary, smoothing his wrinkled cotton gloves while adding: "You asked who I might be, and I reply; the man who means to save you a heavy stake, and your good horse from undeserved defeat. Neither of you can lose, now a rogue has given place to an honest driver, unless foul play is resorted to."

"Make your word good, sir, and I'll break your hand with gold!"

"I drive for honor, not for money, Mr. Nash," coldly bowed the odd customer. "Do your part, and Wide-awake will have one more leaf of laurel to his crown of glory."

"Then you really believe there's foul play?"

"A blind man ought to see as much! Look out that their next trick doesn't catch you napping even worse! Guard your horse, sir, for your own sake, even more than for his. If he is 'doped' after this plain warning, all the world will know where to place the full blame!"

Without waiting for a reply, which, judging from the angrily flushing face of the owner, would hardly have been full of brotherly love, Kent Kasson turned and hastened away, his steps seemingly guided by instinct, since they carried him direct to the spot where Martin Todd was standing, the picture of exultation.

Kasson cut that enthusiastic greeting short, gravely saying:

"We're far from through the woods, brother, and he laughs best who laughs last."

"With you up, pardner, it's all over save shouting!"

"Have you taken note how the betting goes, dear brother?" quietly asked the Preacher Sport.

"Yes, and of all the fools! Why, man, with you and the King as a combination, they're just throwing away their money!"

"Unless they feel that they can break that combination."

"What! you surely don't believe—"

"You'd ought to see even clearer than I can, Mr. Todd, since you are an old residenter, while I'm but a tenderfoot, so to speak. But this I have gleaned: there's a combination against Silver King and his owner. It's a dangerous gang, and they're resolved to win or ruin. Now, if you really hope to pull off your money, fall to work! Don't trust alone to the judges having the track patrolled, but head your friends, and do the good work yourself."

"They wouldn't dare try such a bold trick!"

"I wish I might believe as you do, but I can't. There's more than simple money at stake to-day, and if I can't end the race in our favor this coming heat—"

"What!" ejaculated the astonished sport.

"Yes," coolly declared the missionary. "I've felt the King, and taken the measure of the black. I'll give him the flag next time, if you and your friends make sure I'm not interfered with from the outsiders."

Once more Kent Kasson cut short all retort or questions, slipping deftly through the dense crowd, caring little whether he went, just so the portly sport could not catch and demand further information.

But it seemed that still others felt a strong curiosity in his doings, for scarcely had Kasson gained refuge from Martin Todd, than he was accosted by a somewhat shabbily dressed fellow, whose pointed mustaches and imperial bore the whitening touch of fifty-odd years.

"I've been looking for you, stranger," this personage began, with an odd mixture of bluntness and ceremony. "My card, please. I'm Jim Walker, man about town and sport in general. May I ask the favor of a dozen words with you, in confidence, of course?"

Kent Kasson twisted his head to one side, as he peered at the fine printing on that dingy bit of pasteboard. The name was 'James Walker,' nothing further being added.

"You wish to—ah—ask the prayers of the congregation—Excuse me, brother!" stammered the missionary, flushing painfully as Mr. Walker gave a dry, humorous chuckle. "I really forgot—I'm absent-minded, at times, and I—"

"Never mention it, man, dear," interrupted Walker, slipping a hand through the missionary's arm, and leading him further away from the main crowd. "No harm done, I assure you! And—those who know Jim Walker best might tell you he sorely needs just such pious favors, if he hopes to be saved!"

"I didn't mean—Pray pardon the awkward slip, brother."

"Pardon goes, and all the more readily because I'm coming at you for a favor, my dear fellow. Now—what is an hour of your time worth, to begin with the next minute?"

Kent Kasson arched his brows in surprise as he gazed more keenly at the speaker. That face bore a cool, shrewd smile, but back of that lay as much expression as a graven image wears: no more, no less.

"I'm not quite sure that I catch your full meaning, brother," he said, hesitatingly. "Would it be too much to ask you to speak plainer?"

"And yet, I rather prided myself on cramming it all into a nut-shell," purred the mustached sport, his little eyes glittering as they re-

Kent Kasson, the Preacher Sport.

turned that gaze. "Well, then, may I ask how much you expect to get for driving Silver King in this race?"

"I have made no bargain, brother," meekly answered Kasson, yielding to the hand that urged a resumption of their slow stroll. "I dare say, though, they'll give me the regular rate: fifty dollars."

"Not worth the stooping for, by a gentleman of your breeding, my dear sir!" declared Jim Walker, his nose in the air, his free hand giving a contemptuous flourish. "I'll pay you that amount, ten times over, in exchange for just one hour of your time. What say?"

"To begin—when?"

"This minute!"

"To do—what?"

"Nothing harder than to take a little walk, my dear fellow!"

"All right," assented the Preacher Sport, changing arms, and moving in the opposite direction. "Anything to oblige a brother in distress, and I'm particularly fond of walking, anyhow!"

"But, I say!" ejaculated Mr. Walker, hanging back, his face turning perceptibly paler, his suavity vanishing as by magic. "Where are you taking a fellow, confound you?"

"You asked for a little walk, didn't you? Well, it's not far from this to the judges' stand, and—"

"No you don't!" and Walker jerked his arm free. "I've got no business with those chilly old marks, and don't you forget it!"

"But I have, brother. I'm duty bound to tell the gentlemen who so kindly gave me a mount, that I can better myself through the magnificent generosity of a gentleman who—brother! whither away so fast?"

James Walker turned his head, a ghastly grin contorting his face, and precious little genuine mirth to back up that effort as he spoke:

"You're a keener, you are!"

"But, that little stroll, friend Walker?"

"I'm taking it by my lonesome, thank you, Brother Eli," growled the baffled decoy. "I'm strolling over to the betting booths, to hedge my good money on the King!"

With that, the elderly sport made good his escape.

CHAPTER VI.

A RACE FOR BLOOD.

THE Preacher Sport was laughing softly at this hasty flight, when he caught sight of Martin Todd hastening toward him. There was a dark frown on that frosty-bearded visage, and his greeting was anything but ceremonious as he drew nigh the missionary.

"What the devil are you colloquing with that fellow for, man alive? Don't you know—with it, can't you?"

"Why, brother, you appear unduly excited, seemeth to me," gravely responded the missionary, a touch of reproof entering his tones as he added: "Call not unto the fallen angel, dear brother, lest he cometh in all his power to drag ye down to—eh?"

"Oh, come off!" impatiently interjected Todd, a heavy hand dropping on Kasson's shoulder, his keen gray eyes gazing sternly through those masking glasses. "You're not yielding to the devil's choicest imp, I hope, Kasson?"

"Meaning whom, dear brother?"

"Jim Walker, the slickest, keenest, most tricky capper-in that ever cursed Denver!"

Kent Kasson chuckled softly, his grave visage growing actually humorous as he recalled that odd interview, and its ending.

"Brother Walker, is it, dear sir? Why, we were simply talking business, when he strangely broke away to—"

"Caught sight of me, I reckon! What sort of business could you have with that knave, Kasson?"

"Well, he made me a remarkably liberal offer; so extraordinarily liberal that I could scarcely credit my own sense of hearing, brother!"

"To do what sort of deviltry, man?"

"Nothing more difficult than to take a stroll for just one hour. He promised me five hundred dollars if I would—"

"And you took it?"

"Well, not exactly," came the hesitating reply, as Kent Kasson gently combed his flowing beard with his gloved fingers. "I started with him toward the judges' stand, saying I'd consult with them over the advisability of—what seems to tickle you so immensely, brother?" breaking off with an air of innocent surprise as Martin Todd began a hearty laugh.

"Don't I wish I'd known it in time?" he said, as soon as he could control his voice. "Jim Walker before the judges, charged with bribery! It would be worth a double-eagle just to see the slippery cuss squirm! And you—I'm an old fool, pardner," gripping a hand and shaking it with a vigor in keeping with his frankness. "I really feared you were about to sell us all out to that infernal gang!"

"Well, I'm hardly so bad as all that comes to," gravely answered the missionary sport. "And this Walker; what gang does he belong to?"

"That of Prince Hamilton, no less! And they're making all the trouble for honest sports,

too! And the boy—confound him! He can't and won't see how they're fleecing him, though I've put myself 'way out while trying to open his eyes to the truth!"

"Have you proof positive that the gang, as you call them, are working against the interests of Mr. Nash?" quietly asked Kasson.

"No, not to say flat-open proof, but, I just know they are!"

"Then, wouldn't it be the better part of wisdom to gather such proof, before disturbing the young gentleman?"

"You may be right, only they'll squeeze him dry while we're skirmishing 'round after that proof; then what?"

Kent Kasson gave a shrug of his shoulders, but like one who had no further argument to offer, he changed the subject, to ask:

"It's about time for the next heat to be rung up, brother. Have you seen fit to follow the hint I let drop, awhile since?"

"About guarding the track? Yes. I've let a round score of trusty sports into the trick, and if any fool knave tries to give you trouble while the heat is on, they'll sup sorrow; and we'll furnish the spoon!"

"There's a bit of a hollow near the upper turn, where—"

"I know; I've pointed that out to a brace of keen lads. If any one tries to use that bit of brush and grass as an ambush, he'll wish he hadn't! And now—all eyes open for Jim Walker, pardner! He'll have it in for you, if only because you smoked his dirty trick, just now."

"Is he so dangerous?"

"As a rattler in shedding time! He'd think nothing of slipping a knife betwixt your ribs, if he saw half a chance to get clear by running or dodging, after," seriously replied Todd.

"I'll remember the poor sinner in my prayers this night," piously declared the Preacher Sport, moving away toward the stables.

If the interest had been strong throughout, it rose to fever heat as the bell was rung signaling the rival trotters to prepare for the fourth heat.

Betting came almost to an end, as the sports hurried from friend to friend, eagerly discussing the chances for or against their particular favorites.

Would Silver King come to the track as he had left it, fit to trot for a crown? Would his sudden good humor last, or would he have another fit of the vicious sulks, such as had put Hiram Fitch—old and practiced hand with the whip and ribbons—to shame before all that excited assembly?

The friends of Silver King, and they seemed far more plenty than those who pinned their faith to The Dodger, were loud in their belief that the odd-seeming stranger would pilot the gray to victory; yet all the while their anxious, strained faces told how intensely they felt the suspense.

A deep, roaring sound announced the coming of the rivals on the track, then all grew still—painfully still—as every eye was strained to take critical note of the condition in which each horse put in an appearance.

There was nothing to find fault with in either; both had "cooled off" admirably, and neither gave evidence of having felt the severe strain to which they had been subjected through the three heats thus far trotted.

With his hat pulled so far over his skull that his ears were turned at right angles by the stiff brim, Kent Kasson seemed graver, more owlish than ever. He appeared stiffer and less at ease in his seat, if possible, than in the other heat, but his appearance drew forth only a few scattering gibes; the interest was far too deep for mockery, even with such a powerful provocative as this.

Then, too, the stranger had fairly won his spurs by the masterly fashion in which he had taken the other heat. No novice could have won such honors in opposition to a good horse and better driver.

And the friends of Silver King gained fresh courage as they watched the Preacher Sport once more. Now, as then, he was exhibiting rare coolness, nerve and keen judgment, taking as little as possible out of his horse, whether in the preliminary warming-up jogging, or, later, when the signal was sounded for them to come to the score.

Now, as before, he "stuck to his knitting," paying no heed to the efforts of the other driver to "rattle" either him or his horse. By virtue of winning the last heat, Silver King held the pole, giving the black the outside, and all who critically watched those few false starts, saw that Kasson was determined to hold that advantage.

Long before this a complete understanding had been formed between horse and driver. Silver King recognized the experienced touch, and with that recognition, he had wholly forgotten the torture inflicted by Hiram Fitch, up to that momentous day the kindest of all kind masters.

On his side, Kent Kasson felt that, barring outside interference, he had the race as good as won. So greatly superior was Silver King to The Dodger, in all respects which go to make a perfect trotter for the public race-course, that

his fears of such interference grew stronger the more critically he judged the rivals.

Surely so important a match—from a monetary point of view—would never have been made in cold blood, unless those who backed the black gelding counted on trickery to carry them safely through!

It was for this reason that he had been so urgent to have every point guarded by trusty men. For this reason he had been so quick to suspect the groom who tried to use the drugged sponge. For this reason that he so strongly urged Barry Nash to watch over his good steed.

Only for this more than suspicion, he surely would never have thought of taking such dangerous chances as his hint to Martin Todd indicated: to distance The Dodger, and, by "giving him the flag," end the race then and there!

No man living knew better how much he was risking by such an effort. Silver King plainly had the heels of The Dodger, but "a distance" is terribly long in a race where but two horses are engaged; and if the black gelding could pass that flag before the distance-judge let it fall, he would stand a far better show to win the final heat; and winning that, meant taking the race.

Grave, impassive though his face was, all of these thoughts were flashing through the busy brain of the Preacher Sport as he scored for the start; but never once did he falter in his desperate resolve.

"Give him the flag, my boy!" he was mentally adjuring Silver King, over and over, while the patience of the intensely-interested crowd was being terribly strained by those repeated failures to get off.

The fault for all this plainly lay at the door of The Dodger's driver. Beyond a doubt he was following the orders given him by the owners of the black gelding, but even they could hardly help seeing that, so far from gaining their hoped-for ends, their own horse was suffering far the most.

A grim smile flitted across the marble-like face of the Preacher Sport as his keen, watchful eyes caught sight of a red-bearded man making a signal to the other driver.

"It's for blood, now!" he inwardly declared, as the horses were turned far up the home-stretch, to score for another time. "All right! Win or lose—the flag, old boy!"

Side by side the racers came thundering down the stretch, passing under the wire almost level.

"Go!" shouted the judges, and the heat was on!

Trotting "like a ghost," Silver King forged ahead, even before the first turn was reached, and a wild burst of cheers broke from the lungs of his backers as they saw how rapidly The Dodger was being left behind; and still louder they yelled as they saw the whip called into play, and—"cause the gelding to break!"

Kent Kasson heard that wild roar, but he never glanced over shoulder to ascertain the cause. It was his part to keep Silver King trotting his level best, for he was going for both heat and race!

With each long stride and easy recovery, the gray stallion seemed to gain fresh impetus, yet so easy, so true, so clock-like was his action, that only by taking note of stationary objects could even his admirers fairly estimate his rate of progress.

Twice more The Dodger was forced to a break, each time losing much ground in being steadied to a trot, but Kent Kasson never knew this; he was past the half-mile post, and swiftly nearing that dreaded bit of cover. Then—a corner of his eye gave him warning, and his head was suddenly ducked, just in time to save his skull at the expense of his stiff hat.

A heavy stone knocked that off and away—another rock struck a wheel, splintering a couple of spokes—but Silver King sped on, true as steel!

Swinging into the home-stretch, the Preacher Sport for the first time spoke to his good horse, for the first time touched his glistening hide with the keen whip; a shameful thing to do, considering how nobly the King was proving his right to that title, but—"there was far more than money at stake!"

"Steady, boy! Now—git thar, Eli!" sharply cried the sport, and as only a master of the art could, he aided the King with the ribbons.

Ahead of them was a swaying mass of half-crazed humanity. From their lungs came a deep, sullen roar, hardly human in its savage excitement. Would they content themselves with cheering? Would they not rush upon the track in their madness?

No living man could better estimate that peril, but Kent Kasson never flinched, never ceased driving "for the flag!"

Then—Silver King flashed under the wire, without skip or break, to the mad cheers and yells of victors and vanquished. And Kasson for the first time glanced over a shoulder, as he muttered grimly:

"I've got the heat, but—did The Dodger get the flag?"

CHAPTER VII.

A ROW ON THE TRACK.

It was easier to ask than to answer that question, for no sooner had Silver King passed

under the wire, than the frenzied crowd, losers and winners alike, swarmed over the barriers and flooded the course.

As Kent Kasson glanced backward, he could see nothing save that human wave, above which hats were whirling, canes, umbrellas and arms were waving, while their owners yelled and shouted and screamed as though suddenly turned bedlamites.

He could not catch so much as a glimpse of The Dodger, but that was no positive proof that he had been distanced, in turf parlance; knowing that the heat was lost beyond redemption, his driver would naturally try to save his horse all he possibly could, once inside the flag.

Barely a second that backward look lasted, then the Preacher Sport once more gave his whole care and attention to Silver King and his more immediate surroundings.

"It'll be nip and tuck, if we slipped up on it, old fellow!" he muttered, almost unwittingly aloud, as he gradually eased the gray trotter down. "Steady, pardner! No chances until—Hurrah!"

High above that wild, thrilling chorus his ears distinguished a single word: DISTANCED!

The relief from strain could hardly have been greater had Silver King been his own, and almost before he knew it, Kent Kasson sent forth that lusty hurrah! It was his tribute to justice and right, but an instant later no one, looking at his owlishly grave visage, could have even suspected him of such worldly levity.

Silver King turned easily, and with proudly tossing head, moved up the track toward the wire. The stretch was crowded full with men, one and all of whom seemed fairly crazed with excitement, but Kent Kasson knew the rules of the track from start to finish, and was throwing no chances away.

True, to dismount from his seat without first catching the eyes of the judges and receiving their permission, was but a technicality in a trotting race, but to commit it would give the backers of The Dodger a handle to hang a protest upon, and that must never be.

Scarcely had Silver King slackened his pace to turn, than the dense crowd was split asunder, to give passage to the black gelding, now trotting "fast as a ghost," and true as clock-work under the wire.

But the instant that over-head line was passed, the driver laid whip to his horse in a vicious mauner, and breaking his trot, The Dodger plunged madly down the track, head in air, and jerked savagely from side to side by those ribbons, his feet seemingly all tangled up and carrying him half the width of the course at each maddened plunge.

"Steady, you butcher!" sharply cried Kent Kasson, as he saw this action, and instinctively divined the ruffian's purpose: to wreck or ruin, possibly both.

Then it was that the perfect accord between man and horse became clear, for as the infuriated rascal fairly hurled The Dodger at his victorious rival, meaning to kill or cripple under cover of an unavoidable accident, Kent Kasson whirled Silver King around as on a pivot, and never a wheel was touched.

"I'll even up with ye yet, curse ye!" cried the driver, making a hasty blow at the Preacher Sport with his long whip in passing.

Swift as thought, one cotton-gloved hand caught the whalebone, then gave a jerk that tore the whip away, nearly toppling its owner from his seat, so unexpectedly did that event take place.

Before the fellow could rally, Silver King was slowly trotting up the track once more, his driver grave as ever, seemingly intent only on catching the eyes of the judges in the stand.

"Make way! Clear the track, gentlemen!" hoarsely thundered Martin Todd, hatless, almost coatless, but far too intensely excited and wildly happy to either think or care for his personal appearance just then.

The surging mass opened wide enough for horse and sulky to pass between, and silently lifting his hand—gripping two whips in place of one—Kent Kasson waited their permission to alight.

But in the stand, as well as on the level, that painful suspense had been strongly felt, and their immediate duties at an end, the trio of judges were temporarily lost to what might be transpiring below.

"Hi, therel you gay roosters up in the cock-loft!" cried Martin Todd, recklessly irreverent in his joyous triumph.

This summons brought on a shower of yells and cat-calls from the crowd, but it effected its purpose in so far as to attract the notice of the judges to that uplifted hand.

But before they could nod the requisite permission, a missile came flashing through the air above the heads of the crowd on foot, straight for the life of the driver who sat so stiffly erect while awaiting that delayed permission.

Like most dastard strokes, this knife was buried from the safest quarter, and Kent Kasson never so much as suspected his peril until it was past. And yet, but for an uneasy movement on the part of Silver King, the gleaming steel

would surely have found a sheath in the man's neck!

Instead, the keen point ripped through that close collar, then, diverted from its course, whirled aside and downward, to be lost amidst the startled crowd.

The Preacher Sport may have flinched, but no eyes there were quick or keen enough to detect the action; his hand still remained up, mutely asking permission to leave his seat: his gaze never wavered from the judges' stand.

An instant silence fell over the crowd as that dastardly attempt at murder was made, and so narrowly foiled, although hardly one out of two score had caught sight of the whirling weapon, and none among them all had spotted the assassin.

Still, they knew that something had or was about to happen, and awed by that strange instinct, their recent passions seemed to chill.

"All right! Arrest the man who threw that knife!" shrilly cried one of the judges, almost pitching headlong out of the stand in his excitement.

"Guard the horse, friends!" cried Kent Kasson, the instant leave was granted.

That curious spell was broken as quickly as it had fallen upon the crowd, and the living wave closed about the horse and sulky, penning the driver in his seat, which he was already in motion to leave.

"Who threw it?"

"Don't let him get away!"

These fiercely wondering shouts blended with others which praised both horse and driver; but all cries were not of a flattering nature, and there were oaths and curses enough swelling that confused clamor to show that enemies as well as friends had joined in that sweltering rush.

"Back! don't crowd!" shrilly cried Kent Kasson, as Silver King began to fidget uneasily. "The race isn't over yet, and—"

"Yes it is, my beauty in goggles!" hoarsely shouted Martin Todd almost beside himself in the triumph caused by the victory he had fairly given to the other side. "You turned the trick to a charm! You gave him the flag, and—"

Another mad storm of sound arose, cheers mingling with curses and savage threats against both horse and driver.

Kent Kasson had passed through more than one peril since taking the seat from which Hiram Fitch had so unwillingly descended, but as he listened to those ugly cries, and gazed around upon that mass of faces which so surely hemmed him in, he knew that his greatest peril was right then and there!

From start to finish that race had been calculated to stir up the worst passions of every betting man in attendance. For two heats the wretched driving or thinly masked treachery of Hiram Fitch had elated the partisans of The Dodger, while sinking the hopes of those who banked on Silver King, down to zero. Then came the charges of fraud, followed by a change of drivers, with the consequent turn of the scale.

Now, the race had surely been won and lost! The losers were madly infuriated, and should they openly turn upon the man to whom that defeat was mainly due, how could he escape?

True, the partisans of the King might, and almost surely would, leap to his defense, but—in a crazy riot such as that must surely prove, friends would be hardly less dangerous to the "bone of contention" than his openly avowed enemies!

All of this flashed through the brain of the Preacher Sport, but before he could do aught to extricate himself or horse from that jam, a horseman leaped the inner railing, scattering the crowd as he plunged toward the sulky, savagely cursing as he thrust forward a heavy revolver to fire at the missionary.

"Deuce take ye!" he cried, viciously as he fired. "You've got my money, but I've got you!"

With a sharp cry Kent Kasson threw up his hands, pitching headlong out of the sulky, while the crowd scattered like a bevy of frightened quails as the desperado drove his snorting horse onward, wildly flourishing his smoking pistol as he screamed aloud:

"Clar the track, ye sinners! I'll blow a road clean through, ef ye try to block it up!"

The surprise was so complete that not a single hand was lifted to stay his mad progress. Scores of men were there with pistols on their persons, yet not one among them all seemed to remember that much. And, riding like one gone crazy, the assassin tore through the thickest of the crowd, heading up the track, already giving a vicious yell of scornful triumph as he saw freedom and escape open up before him.

That yell was still hot upon his lips when, coming from beyond the outer railing, a snaky coil of rope shot through the air, the pliant noose at the end of which, closing about that uplifted armed hand, tore its owner violently from the saddle as the inevitable strain came!

"Set on his neck, some o' ye galoots!" shrilly squealed the cowboy who made that adroit cast. "Hold him down fer her brand! Durn sech a pickety corral as this, anyway!"

Wild was the tumult, then, as the panic-smitten crowd began to rally, but high above all

else rung the sharp, clear tones of the Preacher Sport as he gained his footing:

"Alive! take him alive! Make him tell who hired him to kill!"

After that, no eye or ear could keep accurate account of what transpired for a few moments, and a brief summary must suffice.

The desperado made no further attempt to escape, for he had broken his neck in falling from his horse. If he had caught sight of the cowboy in time, no doubt he might have saved at least his life, by breaking that fall in a measure. But that warning was denied him, and not one of the hundreds who viewed the corpse, either cared or dared to utter a word of pity or of regret for the ruffian.

Still, he had carried his secret with him, and Kent Kasson frowned darkly as he realized as much.

The Preacher Sport was bruised a bit, but otherwise uninjured. He had "dodged the flash," so to speak, and certainly owed his life to his quick wit and supple muscles.

Silver King, as well, had come safely through the ordeal, and was now being slowly walked to and fro by a grinning stable-boy, under the close and jealous supervision of his master, Barry Nash.

Martin Todd, wearing a battered yet rakish "pork-pie" hat which he had picked up from the track to replace his own lost tile, was gripping both hands of the meekly submitting missionary, pouring forth his thanks and congratulations in a flood so volatile, so rapid, so mixed up as to defy reproduction in cold type.

The dead desperado was being removed from the grounds by the track police, and their excitement in a measure quelled, the crowd was even now beginning to demand a formal decision from the judges as to the last heat.

"Now it's coming, pardner!" cried Martin Todd, his voice worn hoarse through prolonged shouting and talking. "Open your ears, and get ready for an ovation, man, dear! I'll have you carried—"

The voice of the chief judge cut the enthusiastic sport short, and the longed-for announcement was made:

"Silver King wins the heat—and race! The Dodger distanced! Time—"

Few if any heard the time announced, and as that wild cheer burst from the throats of the winners, Martin Todd joined in most heartily!

CHAPTER VIII.

THE PRINCE IN HARD LUCK.

THERE were other races as yet undecided, and on all of them Barry Nash had more or less heavy wagers, but these no longer held his interest, though a more enthusiastic turfman never entered the quarter-stretch or the betting ring.

He loved Silver King as only a thorough horseman can love one of those noble creatures. He had suffered as only such men can suffer, while his pet was acting so strangely, and though he had five thousand dollars on the match alone, without counting outside wagers, he had not given one lone thought to the money at stake; he would cheerfully have forfeited double that amount, rather than see his good horse defeated.

From this, some idea may be gained as to his state of mind, now that seemingly sure defeat had been turned into victory; and that triumph far more decisive than he, in his most sanguine moments, had dared hope for!

Under these circumstances, it was perfectly natural that his every thought and his tenderest care should be given to the noble gray. Nor was it so strange that he should, in the first flush of victory, have utterly forgotten the man to whom, above all others, he owed that glad triumph.

He had paid no attention to Kent Kasson, nor had he taken a step toward the fallen desperado, so suddenly overtaken by a just retribution. He thought only of getting Silver King off the course, and beyond further peril.

With his own hands he helped Silver King out of the shafts and freed him from the harness. His hands gave the eager creature a single swallow of the water so ardently craved. He adjusted blanket and hood, then slowly led the gallant gray to and fro, only resigning the halter to a stable-boy, with reluctance such as none but a true horseman can fully appreciate.

It was like one rousing from some delicious dream, that Barry Nash turned from Silver King as the cheery voice of Prince Hamilton came to his ears; but he smiled broadly as their hands came together in a firm grip of mutual gratulation.

"Wasn't it glorious? Just all-over-glorious!" declared the Prince, that bright smile duplicated upon his blonde face, making him look the glad winner all over. "This is a day richly worth living for, eh, Nash?"

"I never expect to feel happier, for a fact," declared the exultant owner. "Maybe it's that way, coming so soon after—what did you think of poor Hi's driving, Prince?"

"Was that driving?" in a tone of mock surprise. "I called it rank butchery! But—where did you pick up that queer case, Barry?"

The smile vanished, to give place to a frown, for the memory thus recalled was anything but pleasant.

"Don't accuse me of picking him up! I never saw him before this day, and I'll hardly do mourning if I never lay eyes on him again!"

Hamilton gave a short, dry laugh at this, and his next words had a more personal relation than the unsuspecting Nash dreamed.

"Well, I reckon there's more than one poor devil here to-day who heartily hopes he'll never see the fellow again; unless he is behind the nag they're betting their good money on! Drive? He could give old Jehu himself odds and a beating! I never saw the like in my life!"

"He did well enough, but—well, Silver King was in it, too!" muttered Nash, with a proud glance toward his pet.

"You're right, my boy!" with a hearty clap between those broad shoulders. "In it, and out of it with flying colors, praises be! And, still better! He pulled some jolly souls out of the mire, just when they expected the mud to close forever over their heads—from a betting point of view!"

"But you—you stuck to the fine old fellow, of course, Prince?"

"Did I hedge? Never a bit of it! I had more at stake than I could well afford to lose, but—I never yet went back on a friend, four-footed or two-legged! I'm growing too old to break that record, old friend, and—well, I'll need an hour or two in which to fairly sum up the winnings that good faith has turned my way!"

"I'm glad to hear that, Hamilton," earnestly declared Nash, their hands once more meeting in a cordial grip. "I'd hate to think you had lost by bucking against the King, but the others—well, they went into it with all eyes open. I never made a secret of the King's doings, and all were at liberty to watch him at exercise."

"Of course, but Ferguson!"

"Was he hard hit, outside of our stakes?"

"Pretty hard, but I reckon he'll recoup himself at the faro table, unless this day's experience has soured you on all sorts ofbettings?"

"Why should it?" asked Nash, flushing a bit at that rising inflection and before those keen blue eyes. "I strongly protested against any change being made in drivers, for—"

"Well, people will chatter, and you must expect to catch some nasty whispers, old fellow," chuckled the Prince, then quickly adding: "But what have you done with this—Kasson, isn't he called?"

"I know nothing about him. Haven't seen him since he went off in company with Martin Todd, some little time ago. Why do you ask?"

"Well, I owe the odd-looking fellow a vast deal, of course, and I reckoned 'twas no more than right that I should give him at least a hint to that effect. Still, if he isn't—"

"Todd will know all about him, I reckon. He won the judges over to put Kasson up, but I was far too angry to ask any questions."

"Naturally enough, too! Well, I'll hunt the fellow up, and fetch him over to you when found."

With an abruptness foreign to his usual habit, Prince Hamilton cut the interview short, turning away and moving toward the distant crowd, that set smile seeming to freeze upon his handsome face, but with a dangerous glitter creeping into the keen eyes which had given him timely warning of the approach of a neatly, almost foppishly-garbed gentleman.

"Arthur Maynard, eh?" flashed through his brain. "Coming to congratulate Fool Nash on his success, I suppose! Or—can he have her here? If I thought it, I'd—"

Not even to himself did the Prince complete that thought, but it drove that set smile from his face, bringing instead a look that seemed to add a full dozen years to his record. Just then the dashing sport was not pleasant to look upon.

Arthur Maynard was a young man, having but recently completed his twenty-fifth year. He was a clerk in one of Denver's banks, on a moderate salary. Still, though he had little else to back him up in a financial way, he cut a certain figure in sporting circles, and was regarded by his intimate friends as a close, keen, shrewd bettor at the track.

It was hardly for this reason that Prince Hamilton hated the young fellow so cordially, however. There was a still closer rivalry between them, thanks to a certain young lady whose charming face was even then flashing across Hamilton's brain, as his glittering eyes watched the bank clerk reach and greet Barry Nash.

"My heartiest congratulations, Mr. Nash," were the words which greeted the turfman, just then, though the Prince was far too distant to catch their cheery echoes. "Twas a glorious victory of right over trickery, and I thought I'd not be the last to thank you."

"My thanks, Maynard. Then you backed the King?"

"Only with a trifle—worse luck me!" with a rueful sigh. "The spirit was more than willing, Barry, but my pocket wouldn't permit. But, Miss Nash requested me—"

"What! is Ilda here to-day?" almost harshly interrupted Nash, his heavy brows contracting. "I thought she didn't intend coming!"

"The blame is mine, if any one's, Nash,"

quickly added Maynard. "I had a holiday—the banks all closed, of course—and I begged Miss Ilda to accept my escort to the Park. You're not offended?"

"Well, no, not to say that, but—I'd have dropped 'round to see her, if I'd only known Ilda had changed her mind."

"She asked me to see you, and say that she wished you might come to her for a few moments."

"Tell her that all's well. Tell her that I'd come, gladly, but I can't leave the King until he's fairly cooled out and in his stall. You understand that, Maynard?"

"Of course," with a nod of wise approval. "You've only two things which I envy, Barry: one is your horse, the other is—may I say it?"

"Better not—here!" with a return of his frown.

"Then, at a more favorable place and hour, Mr. Nash?" persisted the bank clerk, trying to smile, but his quivering lips and twitching muscles betraying how deeply important he regarded that permission.

"Settle it with Ilda, first, Maynard, then I'll listen to you. Now, go tell her I can't come, just yet. If she can wait an hour, all right. If not, I'll look her up at home, this evening."

Barry Nash turned abruptly away, without noticing the hand which the love-lorn clerk extended, but Maynard did not entirely despair of ultimate success, as he hastened away to rejoin the lady whose message he had just delivered.

Prince Hamilton at once followed on the track of his rival in love, mentally cursing the crooked luck which had stuck to him all that day.

"If the cub has her here, I'll break his miserable neck for him!" his ugly reflections ran as he tracked the bank clerk across the inner circle, over the race-course proper, and into a mass of carriages stationed at the end of the grand stand opposite that where Miss Ferguson displayed her graces to all admiring eyes. "I wasn't needed in the ring, and if I'd sighted her, I might have made the running there, in place of letting that empty-headed coxcomb have a walk-over!"

But nothing of all this showed in that blandly smiling face as the handsome sport, having tracked his rival to the carriage in which Miss Ilda Nash was seated, doffed his silk tile and bowed his graceful greetings to the young lady.

"You are blessed as well as blessing, Miss Ilda," he began, without giving Arthur Maynard a chance to report in full. "You give happiness to all eyes, and your own bright orbs have witnessed the race of the century! Was it not glorious, though! And the gallant King—prophetic title!—has come through in prime condition!"

"Of course, the King's all right, Miss Ilda," Maynard hastened to edge in, "but your brother says he can't leave him, just yet. If you can wait here for an hour or so, he'll come, but if not, he'll see you at home."

"You surely are not thinking of leaving the Park so early, Miss Ilda?" asked the Prince, in his blandest tones. "True, the best is over, now that the King has won his race, but—"

"My time is yours, Miss Ilda," interrupted Maynard, wholly ignoring his rival so far as words or looks went. "If you wish to see the end of the races, I'll be happy to wait with you, but if not, you have only to say the word. If I can suit you, I'm more than happy!"

Not a little embarrassed, Miss Nash glanced almost timidly from face to face as the gentlemen spoke, but at this she murmured:

"If you really would just as soon go now, Mr. Maynard, why—"

"Gladly, if you wish it, Miss Ilda! Pardon me, sir," with a stare at the Prince, then giving a stiff nod as he added: "Allow me a bit more room, if you please, Mr. Hamilton!"

"In your way, Maynard? Beg pardon. If you are really going, Miss Ilda, may I beg the privilege of a seat? My rig is not here, and if you would not be too seriously incommoded, I'll owe you everlasting thanks."

It was a bold, even audacious move, but the Prince was growing desperate after his cool, peculiar fashion.

Miss Nash flushed brightly, then almost inaudibly spoke:

"If I—I am indebted to Mr. Maynard for my own seat, Mr. Hamilton. Perhaps, if you were to transfer your request to him—"

"Which I sincerely trust you will not, Mr. Hamilton," promptly interposed the bank clerk, flushed with a touch of triumph as he entered the carriage and seated himself beside the lady.

"And if I should be so impudent, sir?" frowned the Prince.

"I should be under the painful necessity of declining your proposition, my dear sir," bowed his rival, with surface politeness. "I value my present privilege far too highly to even think of sharing it with another, so—you may turn, driver!"

The Prince fell back, after an elaborate bow to Miss Nash, but as they drove away, he grimly muttered to himself:

"I'll pay them both out for this: her in love, him in hate!"

CHAPTER IX.

BEATING A RETREAT.

MARTIN TODD joined most heartily in the chorus which greeted that announcement from the judges' stand, and never a man among them all seemed more intent on splitting his throat wide open while making the welkin ring.

Kent Kasson showed no inclination to unite with the crowd in giving open expression to the triumph which he, in common with so many, surely must have felt at heart. Instead, his face was more than sober, better befitting loser than victor.

"Bless your gig-lamps, pardner!" cried Todd, cutting his hoarse cheering short as he took note of this almost gloomy silence. "Why don't you turn colt and kick up your heels with the rest of us? Why don't you rip and snort and rear and tear, and turn end for end as any respectable—I say, pardner!"

As his boisterously happy words failed to bring even the ghost of a smile to that face, the portly sport grew grave and even anxious in his turn, his keen eyes sweeping over that motionless figure as he asked the questions:

"You're not hurt, friend? Those devils didn't let you have it, after all? You're not—are you hurt, man, dear?"

"Unto the very soul, brother," moodily muttered the missionary, his head wagging dolefully in keeping with his voice. "The sound of rejoicing filleth the air, but is all happiness? Is all tuneful accord? Where there are gathered so many winners, must there not be losers as well, brother?"

"To be course, and why not? Our turn today, theirs to-morrow! And so I say unto you, rise out of these doleful dumps, and kick up thy heels with the rest of us colts! A cheer for the winners, a fig for the losers, and a wish that they may show better judgment next time!"

"There is but one judgment, brother, and that—"

His meaning flashed upon the sport, and turning a bit paler, Martin Todd gave a hasty shake of his head and shoulders as he cut the missionary short.

"Ugh! don't lug him back, even in thought, pardner!"

"If I only might bring him back in reality!" gloomily muttered the strange being, his head bowed, his tones husky with strong emotion. "If he was sinful, so much the greater his need for time in which to read aright his moral transgression, and learn to repent! If his soul was attuned to crime, so much the more he—"

"Oh, drop it, man!" impatiently interjected Todd, slipping a hand through the missionary's arm, and leading him away. "Didn't he do his level best to murder you?"

"I hold him no grudge for that, brother."

"Neither do I—now he's paid off," bluntly declared the sport. "Hurry, man, dear! Pick up your feet a bit livelier, can't you?"

"Is there such urgent need of haste, Brother Todd?"

"Maybe no, but maybe yes! Anyway, now I've got the blinders off again, I'll feel a mighty sight easier when we've left the Park a snug ways behind us: see?"

Kent Kasson abruptly hung back, a tinge of sharpness entering his tones as he asked his companion:

"Do you fear for yourself alone, Brother Todd? If not, if this unseemly haste comes through apprehension of evil falling to my share, then I say unto you that—"

"Haven't you had a polite sufficiency, even yet, pardner?" abruptly demanded Todd, a frown darkening his honest face as he confronted the self-styled missionary. "One fellow offered you his best knife! Another gave you a blue pill!"

"Peace to his soul, and lightly fall the judgment upon it!" murmured Kasson, one hand lifting to his head as though to uncover it, but checked midway as its owner ejaculated: "Bless my soul! No hat? I'll catch my death if—now I remember!"

Seemingly forgetful of all else, Kent Kasson hurried across the level inclosure, seeking to recover the ancient tile which had been knocked from his head when the last desperate effort was made to foil grand Silver King.

A doleful groan parted his lips as the battered property was regained, and with intense earnestness in his face, the Preacher Sport bent all his energies to smoothing out the deep dents that viciously hurled stone had caused.

"Not so bad, though it might be better, Brother Todd?" he said, with a forced smile, as he pulled the hat down to his ears, then gripped anew the baggy umbrella which had been thrust between his knees for safety while his hands were thus engaged. "Old friends are best and dearest, singeth the sweet poet, but—I'm sadly afraid I'll have to discard this once glossy tile, as soon as I can find a batter."

"I'll give you an entire bat-store, Kasson, if you'll drop all this nonsense, and come with me," quickly cut in Martin Todd. "You're not half the fool you look, and—"

"Accept my humble thanks, brother, for the compliment," meekly bowed the missionary.

"That's all right, though it mayn't sound just the cheese," once more cut in the sport, slightly flushing. "Take me as I mean, not as I say."

"And you mean that I'd ought to turn tail and take to my heels, Brother Todd? You fancy my precious hide is in peril from the poor fellows who made the mistake of betting on the wrong nag?"

"Just that! Let one of them set up the right sort of yelp, and the whole gang would jump, to eat you up! You know that, man?"

"I know that—Aheem!—how frightfully this dust parches one's throat! Did you ever observe that phenomenon, Brother Todd?"

"Times without number, and just as often I've hit upon the only antidote, Brother Kasson," declared the sport, falling in with the humor of his recently formed acquaintance, locking arms and leading the way toward one of the many refreshment booths with which the Park was supplied. "Come take a snort with me, pardner!"

The Preacher Sport meekly yielded, permitting himself to be led as a lamb to the slaughter, but as one of the white-aproned attendants leaned over the bar to take their orders, his was not given until that faded umbrella was hoisted as a shield to both face and voice.

Martin Todd stared in amazement, but Kent Kasson had thoughts only for his own parched lips and dry throat. He drew the umbrella close over his head and shoulders while hastily emptying a tall glass of—

"Thunder-and-guns!" exploded Todd, half in mirth, half in indignation such as only a hearty, bluff sporting man can fully experience. "That isn't—Soda-pop, or I'm a saint!"

"Was anybody looking, brother?" spluttered the missionary, a scared light coming into his eyes as he dropped the empty glass on the bar, turning away with the still more hasty speech: "Settle for both—I'll repay—wait for you out yonder!"

Martin Todd gulped down his whisky-straight, dropped a coin on the counter, then hastened after his odd discovery without waiting for his change.

"Well, you are a sweet curiosity, I don't think!" he ejaculated, as he caught up with the Preacher Sport, slipping a hand through his arm and slightly changing his direction without bringing him to a halt.

"Did—was I observed?" quavered Kasson, in meek amazement. "Now hath the tempter triumphed! Now hath the erring mortal reached the uttermost depths of degradation! Now hath—oh, Brother Todd, why did you not reach forth thy strong hand to drag me back from—you can laugh, brother?"

"Laugh?" echoed Todd, tears of mirth twinkling on his lashes. "No, Brother Kasson, I'm weeping—just weeping salt—soda-pop! Well, if I ever, I never did! Soda-pop! Sinl Grief and lamentations and—did anybody see me wildly dissipating on—oh, fan me with a straw!"

Kent Kasson unlocked arms, his gloved hands gripping the mirth-convoluted sport by each shoulder, his nose thrust close to those laughing lips. One vigorous sniff, then the missionary recoiled, with a groan of mingled horror and sad reproof, to croak:

"And you took whisky, Brother Todd? If I could even have suspected such a course on your part, I'd surely have—"

"Taken the same medicine, of course," bluffed cut in his companion, regaining possession of that withdrawn arm, and once more moving toward the great gates. "Drop your nonsense, old fellow, and own up frankly!"

"Well, if—But not in such a crowd!"

"All right: I'm doing my level best to get you out of the crowd, pardner, and now I don't mind admitting that I'll never draw a full, free breath until we leave the Park good and well behind us! You've done more than enough to set the entire gang down on you, and if they get even half a chance, they'll do you up, to a dead moral!"

Kent Kasson gave a dolorous groan, then almost piteously said:

"'Twas a cunning snare set by Satan, but how could I escape? Truly, and of a verity, my straying feet were entangled, and— Could I stand meekly by while the worthy descendant of a grand old horse fell a victim to gambling harpies? Nay, brother, erring flesh and blood were all too weak for that!"

"And Martin Todd, for one, is 'way-up glad of it, pardner! I'd waded in mighty nigh up to my neck, and I was just going to quit fighting for it, when you chipped in!"

"How could I help it?" repeated Kasson, brightening up a bit under the hearty appreciation of his newly found friend. "My sainted father reared Wide-awake, the great-grand-sire of Silver King. How could I see the horse my father loved, disgraced through his descendant?"

"You couldn't, and you didn't, and I'm powerfully glad of it all, from start to finish!" heartily declared Todd. "Just how glad—and on account of others, even more than my own—I haven't the time to tell you right now, but I'll try it on later."

By this time the two friends had drawn near the main entrance to the Park, and bidding Kasson await his return, Todd hastened to one of the stalls hard by, ordering his rig prepared as quickly as possible.

If his face could be taken as evidence, Martin

Todd had feared the missionary would take advantage of this opportunity to effect an escape, but that anxious expression cleared away as he found Kasson meekly awaiting his coming.

A liberal patron is briskly served, and in a very few minutes more the neat road-wagon was brought forth, and mounting, the couple passed through the gates, then sped along at a fast jog behind Todd's bay roadster.

"Now, this is something like!" ejaculated the worthy sport, a look of strong relief coming into his honest face as the Park was left behind them. "I hardly dared count on getting out of that with a whole skin, and as for you—man, dear, you'd ought to give prayers of thanksgiving this night, that you're able to give them!"

"I need not thy hint to that effect, Brother Todd," meekly said the missionary, but there was a touch of curiosity in his tones as he added: "Did you recognize the poor fellow who came to such a sad ending?"

"No. Never laid eyes on him before, nor could I hear of any one who did know him; or, rather, who would own as much. He didn't belong to the regular gang, but—"

"There is such a gang, then, brother?"

"Sure! But you gave them an upset which'll go a little ways toward delaying their feast—thanks be!"

"Their feast?" echoed Kasson. "Since you speak as though you held a store of knowledge you are willing to share, brother, pray tell me a little more. What feast?"

"That's easy told, and I wish it wasn't. They're after the dust, of course, but this day's work shows only too clearly that they're growing too greedy to wait for an outwardly honest winning: worse luck Nash!"

"Do you mean Barry Nash, owner of Silver King?"

Martin Todd gave an almost vicious nod. It was clear he felt strongly concerning the matter, and Kasson's face took on an expectant expression as he waited for a more explicit answer to his last query.

But before that answer could come, the rapid clatter of hoofs and the rattle of wheels in swift progress came from their rear, and turning his head for a glance over his shoulder, Martin Todd gave a sharp curse as he recognized the comers.

"Steady, now, pardner!" he muttered, settling himself in his seat and tightening his grip on the ribbons. "Part of 'em's coming at our heels, right now!"

CHAPTER X.

CORNERING THE PREACHER SPORT.

The road lay clear ahead of the bay, for as yet only a few stragglers had left the Park, and none of these were anywhere near our two friends just then.

Kent Kasson turned his head for a glance, even before Martin Todd gave that hasty warning, and though his grave visage betrayed no change, he instantly recognized one of the two men seated in the gayly-painted and varnished road-wagon, which, drawn by a span of fine trotters, was rapidly overhauling them.

"My plausible friend, James Walker!" was his cool observation, as he resumed his former position. "Possibly he wishes to renew his very liberal offer for an hour of my time, brother."

"Don't mention it—least of all in his hearing," growled Todd, frowning darkly, but maintaining his steady jog as before. "Maybe he don't mean mischief, but if he should—don't stop to calculate the force of your blow, but strike for keeps!"

"You drive a good nag, Brother Todd; possibly he can speed yet a little faster!"

Todd flashed a keen glance into the face of his companion, but it was gravely stoical as ever. Had he worn a mask of iron, less of what lay back of it could hardly have been read.

"You're not nervous, then?"

"Why should I be nervous, dear brother?"

"Your asking that is enough. Steady, now! We'll not pick a fuss, but if one is shoved upon us, put in your best licks, pardner!"

"Surely these gentlemen—"

"Gentlemen!" echoed Todd, with a short, hard chuckle. "One's a professional decoy, the other's a disgraced pugilist!"

"Whooroo! for The Dodger, an' devil burn those who dare say nixey!" shouted a coarse, whisky-roughened voice from the rear.

"Don't answer him back, pardner!" muttered Todd, in hasty warning.

"Who is he?"

"Tim Dooley, one of the worst thugs that ever disgraced Colorado soil! He means mischief, too, dead sure!"

The road-bed was wide and smooth at this point, affording ample space for the free passage of teams, whether meeting or passing, but as a mute token of peace, Martin Todd turned his horse slightly to the right, giving the team behind them still more room.

Kent Kasson cast another glance backward, despite the warning of his companion. He caught a wicked smile on the thin face of Jim Walker, who was seated on the near side, his burly companion handling the reins.

He had hardly time to form an estimate of

the pugilist, but he saw enough to convince him that Martin Todd was right: mischief of some sort was meant, and passing an arm around his new friend, to grip the seat as a double brace to them both, he muttered:

"Look out, friend! They mean to take a wheel, I reckon!"

This was pretty much what Todd had expected, but, good though his own roadster was, he knew the bay could not out-foot that magnificent span: the pride of Prince Hamilton, and the kings of the road.

"What the devil d'y'e maane by blockin' the road, anyhow?" roared Tim Dooley, in pretended rage, as he gave his team a touch of the whip, at the same time bearing on the ribbons in such a manner as to insure a collision. "Out o' the way, thin, or—aff comes the wheel o' ye!"

Better for his purpose, perhaps, had he held control of his tongue, although Martin Todd was ready to do his level best to baffle his ugly trick. A sharp stroke of the lash sent the bay forward just as the wheels came together, lessening the shock greatly, then a jerk of the lines pulled him back, his weight aiding to bring the other team to a gradual pause.

Neither wheel was broken, though they were closely locked, that on the front of Hamilton's wagon lying in between that of the other and the strong box.

Kent Kasson caught a rein beyond Todd's grip, giving it a fierce jerk, at the same time forcing the whip down across the back of the bay trotter. The frightened creature swerved sharply to the right, and as the gayly painted wheel was caught against the end of the box, there came a splintering crash which was audible above the savage curses of the two knaves.

The bay horse, freed by the destruction of that wheel, sprung away, but not knowing how much damage his own wagon had suffered, Martin Todd instantly drew him down, just in time to witness the ruin wrought by that deft trick on the part of the Preacher Sport.

The front wheel gave way, letting the wagon down in front, fairly pitching Tim Dooley out on his head and shoulders, while Jim Walker only saved himself from a still more dangerous fall, by an agile leap to the left.

"Hang on to 'em, Dooley!" he spluttered, recovering from the shock of his descent, and springing to the heads of the frightened horses with the activity of a cat. "Don't let 'em get away! And you—curse you for clumsy idiots! Lend a hand, can't you?"

"Devil away will they git away, thin!" boarishly cried the pugilist, clinging to the ribbons despite the danger he ran of being struck by those plated heels. "Howld fasht, Jimmy! An' ye—wait till Oi've toime to ate yeez up, ye devils!"

Then was the time a truly prudent man would have made the most of, by beating a hasty retreat while both ruffians were busily engaged with their frightened, plunging team, and possibly Martin Todd, knowing all he did, would have improved the opening right shrewdly; but before he could utter a warning word, Kent Kasson sprung from his seat to the road, hastening to the assistance of Jim Walker.

A true lover of all horses, the Preacher Sport could not act otherwise, for the animals were powerful, and every second risked the life or limbs of the man who clung to their bits. If his hold should break before Tim Dooley could recover his feet, those deadly hoofs would crush him to earth—maybe to death.

But it was of the horses themselves that Kent Kasson was thinking, just then. If they should tear loose, it would be to enter upon a mad, blind runaway, which would end only in death or broken limbs for both noble creatures.

"Steady, boys! Quit yanking at 'em, you idiot! So-ho! steady, now, steady, my beauties!"

It was the grasp and the voice of a master, and almost immediately the intelligent creatures recognized both. Their furious plungings subsided, and the worst peril was past before the partially stunned pugilist could fairly recover his footing, lines still tightly gripped in his stumpy but muscular fingers.

"Unhook the tugs, Dooley!" sharply called out Martin Todd, who was still seated in his wagon, soothing his own horse while anxiously regarding the others. "Get them clear of the wreck, first thing, man!"

"An' twas yeez that wrecked it, thin! Ow-wow! devil ate me widout bastin' av Oi don't—Stiddy, ye bloody b'astes!"

"Unhook them, then talk!" supplemented Walker, quickly recognizing the value of that advice. "If they get away, Hamilton—"

He cut himself short, but Todd laughed grimly, then said:

"I know the team, Jimmy, so that don't count for a slip. Did the Prince send you after my wheel, I wonder?"

"Niver a sind did he sind, faith, but it's comin' Oi am, and on me own hook, me bucko, av ye don't be lavin' a sthreak av imptyniss at the tail o' ye be roonnin' away afoor Oi cabn get the full o' me two habnds impty! Break a mon's new wagon, will ye? Ow-wow!"

In savage rage the Irishman spluttered, but until the horses were secured from further peril,

he dared make no more serious move toward revenge for his unexpected defeat.

"Blame yourself, Tim Dooley," retorted Todd, boldly enough, now that the band had begun to play. "I gave you double the room the law allows, but you wanted a wheel—and I reckon you've got it, too!"

"It's a wheel Oi'll be afther takin' aff o' the both o' ye, thin!" growled Dooley, following the threat with a volley of fierce oaths.

"Swear not, rash sinner!" sternly cried Kent Kasson, leaving the horses, now that his assistance was no longer necessary. "He that taketh the name of his Creator in vain, shall suffer undying torments! Yea, he shall be damned, even as he damns! He shall be pitched headlong into the boiling sea of fire and brimstone, where—"

"Come, Kasson, jump in!" sharply interposed Todd, hoping even now to escape further trouble by resuming their interrupted retreat.

"Roon, ye glash-oyed whelp av a black hound's sisther! Roon, or be the howlies! Oi'll b'ate the loife clane out av ye, so Oi will, now!"

Trusting the horses to the care of Jim Walker, now that they were clear from the wrecked wagon, Tim Dooley jerked off his coat as though fully bent on putting his savage threats into full execution; but before he could do more, Martin Todd had him covered with a cocked revolver, and was sternly crying:

"Steady, Tim Dooley! One step further, and I'll blow you to kingdom come!"

The burly thug shrank back, his bruised face turning almost pale as his pig-like eyes glared into that grim muzzle.

"Howld on, mahn!" he spluttered, agitatedly.

"Hold on you, then!" retorted Todd, but following the pugilist in his shrinking with that steady aim. "You came for a row, and if you can't get along without it, pick a man nearer your own size, in place of jumping on a gentleman whose cloth prevents him from striking back."

"Put up the goon, mahn, and Oi'll lick the both o' ye, wid wan hand toed to the back av me! Put up the pishtil! Sure, an' Oi'm not haaled, except with the two fishts av me own, an' ye know it right will, too!"

"No more are we slingers, Tim Dooley, and right well you know that, else you'd never have rushed for a row so hot," coolly retorted Todd.

"Jimmy totes guns: don't try to catch the drop. Walker, or I'll drop you, too mighty quick!"

Kent Kasson sprung between the two men, and his gloved left hand deftly closed over the muzzle of that revolver as he spoke:

"Through the hand of peace, if you must shoot, Brother Todd!"

"But Dooley—"

"His anger is directed mainly toward my person, I apprehend. Am I not right, Mr. Dooley?"

"Oi'll trash ye, be gob! Av not roight now, thin later! Oi'll never lave the track av ye, whoile there's a whole bone in the pelt that kivers that rack av bones! And that's an oath, d'y'e moind, me bucko?"

"You hear that, Kasson? Don't waste words with the brute, but jump in, and I'll engage that Timothy don't interfere."

"Patience, Brother Todd," came the grave reproof. "And you, my erring sinner," turning again to the angry pugilist. "You are fully determined to give me what you call a licking, then? Nothing less will serve to cool your overheated blood? Speak briefly, for already this unfortunate altercation is attracting unwelcome attention from the public."

Such was the case; even so soon, half a dozen rigs had paused near the scene of disturbance, and still others were flocking to the spot, like flies attracted by the scent of carnage.

"Oi'll trash ye, an' Oi say it over wance more!"

Kent Kasson heaved a long sigh, then meekly said, in slow, grave tones:

"What must be, must, I suppose! If it is so written, I'll take my thrashing with as good a grace as I can muster, but you must agree to one condition, first, Mr. Dooley."

"Wan—what?"

"That, if the thrashing falls to *your* share when we lock horns, you solemnly promise me to sign the total abstinence pledge," gravely explained the Preacher Sport. "You are full of bad whisky, my poor man, and only a miracle, such as this, can save you from sinking into an untimely grave, where the worm stingeth forever! Where the—"

His baggy umbrella wildly waving, the missionary seemed fairly launched upon the sea of intemperance, bent on depicting all its evils; but before he could say more, a general burst of laughter put him to confusion, and an end to his lecture, almost ere it had begun.

Martin Todd joined in that laugh, hoping that Tim Dooley would be shamed out of insisting on a fight with one who seemed so poorly fitted for the match; but his worst passions were uppermost, and he fairly tore off his coat which had been held midway by the pistol of the portly sport.

"Will Oi soign?" he roared, in savage triumph. "Yis, av ye trash me, faith! Riddy, ye devil, or Oi'll b'ate ye anyhow!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SPORT AND THE PUGILIST.

"Go slow, Tim Dooley!" sharply cried Martin Todd, fairly aching for a plausible excuse for using his pistol, for in no other way could he see a chance of saving Kent Kasson from paying the full penalty of his rash yielding.

"It's slow enough Oi'll contint meself wid bein', sor, av the dirthy gossoon ownly boinds himself fasht to give me wan weenty chance till aaven up wid him for me whale, faith!" declared the pugilist, something akin to a smile coming into his bull-dog visage now that he scented a probability of a bruising-match.

"Form a ring an turn 'em loose!" cried one of the sports drawn to the spot by the little gathering before him.

"Two to one on gig-lamps—in wind!" mocked another.

From lip to lip ran real or would-be witticisms, and a troubled look came into the grave face of the Preacher Sport as his glasses turned from quarter to quarter in a vain effort to catch up with those glib tongues.

He did not seem nearly so much alarmed at the warlike preparations which Tim Dooley was making, as he did at finding so many curious and half-pitying eyes resting upon him.

"Sphit it out, glash-eyes!" growled the pugilist, aching to fall to work, yet held fairly quiet by the gun Martin Todd was so ready to call into play. "Is it foight, thin? Or will Oi make the ligs o' ye break yer nick roonin' away, faith?"

"Have you duly considered my condition, brother?" meekly asked the disciple of Moses. "If I flog you, instead of your thrashing me, will you sign the total abstinence pledge?"

"Will Oi, is it? Will Oi not, thin? Yis, be gobs, av ye t'ump me by mishtake, Oi'll sign as manny plidges as ye ashk! Sign them? Yis, and ate them afther, thin borry a lig o' ye to use as a toothpick, faith!"

The burly pugilist broke off with a coarse laugh, which found more than one echo from the gathered crowd. Every one seemed to know the fellow, and brute though his every word and feature proclaimed him, it did not call for a polling to decide which man loomed up as favorite.

Nearly every one appeared eager for the "scrap" to begin, and such being the case, preparations were promptly begun for forming a ring.

Tim Dooley, now that he felt fairly assured of his victim, turned almost good-natured, and lent a hand to securing the span of fidgeting horses behind which he had come to the spot.

Martin Todd, in anything but a good humor, turned his rig over to the care of a friend whom he recognized in that growing crowd, then drew the Preacher Sport aside, to what privacy might be had without too openly inviting criticism as fugitives.

"Oh, man, dear, what made you take such a slip?" he almost groaned, but nearly as much in anger as in pain. "Why didn't you jump in, and show 'em our backs when we had a chance?"

"Would you rather run away, brother? Would not that lay us open to the charge of being—abem!—cowards?" meekly asked Kasson.

"Better a sound-skin coward than a crippled fool!"

"Thank you, brother! At least you give me a choice of titles, although the selection is hardly—"

"I don't mean just *that*, Kasson, of course, but—I'd give my best finger if you hadn't jumped out as you did! Only for that—"

"Only for that, man or beast would surely have come to grief."

"And now you'll— Oh, you just can't fight that brute, Kasson!"

"Do you really think that way, Brother Todd?"

"I know it, man! I hate the rascal worse than poison, but I'll do him justice that far: he hasn't bis equal in Denver with the raw 'uns. You'll only be a chopping-block in his hands, pardner?"

Kent Kasson drew a long breath, and his grave face seemed to increase in length at that ugly prediction. Still, he rolled up the cotton gloves which he had pulled off his hands, stowing them away in a tail-pocket, then as deliberately unbuttoned his rusty black coat.

"I'd say, make a break and run for it, even now," muttered Todd, as he cast an uneasy glance around them, "but you just can't! Look how the sports are closing in: they're red-hot for the fun!"

"Will ye pl'ase sthir him up a bit, thayre, thin?" impatiently called out Tim Dooley, already stripped for the fray, and more than eager to begin the thumping process.

"Button your lip, Flannel-mouth!" retorted Todd, assuming a confidence which he was far from feeling. "After we fairly get there, you'll think we've come too mighty soon."

"Is it harrd cash that's hilping ye bluff, Todd? Av ye want to lay out any spare doost, Oi'm the laddy-buck to take ye, faith!"

"I never bet against anything lower than a mangy cur, Irish, so you needn't think I'll begin at this late hour. Now—hold your wind,

for you'll have a better use for it as soon as my man's ready!"

Of course all this was bluffing, and so Kent Kasson must have understood, for in his meekest tones he murmured:

"I am in your hands, Brother Todd. What do you advise me to do, since you are so positive in your assertion that I am too feeble to cope successfully with this man of Belial?"

"There's nothing the matter with your wind, anyway!" muttered the sport, in poorly disguised disgust. "Do? What can you do, after agreeing to meet Dooley, but take your thumping and get off as lightly as may be? And so—*give in*, just as quick as your stomach'll let ye! Drop at his first blow, even if it don't save you that trouble, and I'll bluff the gang off with my guns!"

Without actually promising to follow this really excellent advice, the Preacher Sport completed his preparations, which were far less elaborate than those of his burly adversary, who had stripped himself bare to the waist, in regular ring fashion, barring the trunks.

The road had been cleared of horses and vehicles, and there were enough eager sports collected to form a pretty solid ring for the two men, as large as the "magic squared circle," if not quite so regular.

Removing his coat, which he tossed over an arm of his friend, Kent Kasson produced a brace of very business-like revolvers from some hiding-place, bringing a look of pleased amazement into Todd's face as the weapons were handed him, with the quietly spoken words:

"Have them bandy to my fingers, Brother Todd, in case your little bluff is called by the gang. They can bark, if they don't bite!"

Without waiting for an answer, the Preacher Sport entered the living ring, quietly glancing over his muscular adversary, in no wise disconcerted by the triumphing grin worn by Tim Dooley.

"Twig his dicer! Look at his gig-lamps!" cried one of the ring, his glib tongue giving him the start of his mates, for a general laugh broke forth at that odd spectacle.

"Divil a wan o' me cayres av he coomes in his coffin, faith!" mocked Tim Dooley, his muscular arms beginning a weaving motion, as though their master was hardly able to wait for the call of "time!"

"The overcoat's waiting 'round the corner for you, Dooley," retorted Todd, entering the ring as second to the missionary. "I'll tote you to it when my principal gets through with you, and never charge your heirs a cent for drayage, either!"

"Will ye lishten at that, now?"

"Hats off, gentlemen, all! The parson's going to open with prayer!"

"If I did, 'twould not include you, brother, since your own tongue brands you as past saving by prayer alone," gravely quoth the missionary, removing his glasses, but pulling his battered hat still further on his head. "Let the thrashing process begin, Brother Dooley!"

"Whoo-roo!" roared the half-drunk pugilist, making a reckless rush, as though he counted on little or no opposition.

Yet his training in ring tactics stood him in good stead, for he handled himself well, and his guard was well-nigh perfect.

With an activity which few expected in one of his stiff, awkward carriage, Kent Kasson evaded that bull-like rush, his head dipping and swaying to one side just as a ponderous fist shot toward it. And before Tim Dooley could check and turn, the Preacher Sport was standing at ease near the center of the ring, his hands down, a decorous smile marking his otherwise owlshly grave visage.

"Steady, friend Timothy! I could, but I wouldn't. Work a bit of the red liquor out of me, then I'll take the thumping you promised me."

"And give it back with double interest!" almost howled Martin Todd, for the first time beginning to think that he had underestimated the capabilities of this odd stranger.

A smile was still on that bull-dog face, but it was the smile of hatred, not derision. That adroit evasion told Dooley that he had not picked up an entire novice in ring tactics, and though his rush was just as savage as the first, it showed a great deal more forethought.

Fortunately, perhaps, the ring was amply large enough to give both men considerable "elbow-room," and those forming the circle seemed willing to show fair play to pugilist and preacher alike.

Thanks to all this, Kent Kasson contrived to evade that and succeeding rushes, without coming to actual blows. He seemed light as a cat on his feet, and though he presented a unique spectacle, with his hat pulled down to his ears, there was little of awkwardness visible in figure or in actions.

"Steady, Tim!" cried Jim Walker, in warning. "He's trying to wind you, man! Now—mash him, boy!"

Just then Dooley succeeded in one of his ends, and despite his almost phenomenal activity, Kent Kasson was penned in a corner of the ring, where it seemed impossible for him to escape without at least an interchange of blows.

With a snarl of savage delight, Dooley struck at that grave face, but it swayed to one shoulder, letting the heavy fist pass harmlessly by. A forearm caught the other fist, lifting it high enough for that supple neck to carry a ducking head below the danger line, and at the same instant the Preacher Sport countered with his left, cutting that too-fat cheek, and leaving an "early closing" sign beneath one eye.

So hard was the blow, that it drove the burly pugilist back a pace, and only his ring-training saved him from a knock-down, particularly as Kasson promptly followed up his advantage, striking swift and true, each blow leaving its mark, sending the blood flying around in red spray.

Those who best knew Tim Dooley, were too greatly surprised to utter a sound, but Martin Todd could not refrain from yelling at the top of his voice, actually breaking into a clumsy double-shuttle as he saw those lightning-swift punches.

"Thump him, will ye, Timothy? Fix him for a coffin, eh? Glory to— Down him pardner! Now you have got him!"

And Martin Todd was right, strange as it may appear, for, dazed by that first terrible stroke, and given no opportunity for rallying, so swiftly did other blows follow, Dooley unconsciously dropped even his imperfect guard, and Kent Kasson was in just the humor for taking full advantage of the opening thus offered him.

He sent his left fist straight to the blinking left eye of the pugilist, the force of that stroke staggering Dooley still worse. Then, with the awkward-seeming, but really terrific "swing," the Preacher Sport brought his right arm around, his tightly-clinched fist falling fair and square on that vulnerable spot, the point of the jaw, close to the ear.

It was the now celebrated "knock-out swing," and without sound or effort to save himself, Tim Dooley toppled over sideways, falling his full length, more like an upset post than aught with life and sensation.

The crowd stared in breathless amazement. Even Jim Walker seemed speechless, if not petrified by this wholly unexpected result.

Kent Kasson sprung past his fallen adversary to the side of the hardly less amazed sport who had entered the ring so gloomily as his second. He caught his coat with one hand, then deftly took possession of his pistols, thumbs on hammers and fingers on triggers.

"Knocked out, by the glories!" cried Martin Todd, breaking the odd spell which had fallen upon him, as well as others.

"Silence, all!" sharply cried the victor, lifting an armed hand to lend emphasis to his command. "Are you satisfied, Mr. Walker?"

The decoy stared stupidly at the speaker, but made no reply.

"Silence gives consent, and you have my humble thanks, Mr. Walker," bowed the Preacher Sport. "Look to your friend, brother, and when he wakens, pray remind him of his promise to sign the total abstinence pledge, please. Keep at him until he does sign, or bad whisky'll serve him a still worse trick than it has this sad day!"

CHAPTER XII.

A CHAT BY THE WAY.

UNDER cover of the hearty cheer which burst forth to greet his unexpected victory, Kent Kasson gave Martin Todd warning, his low tones meeting no other ear, thanks to his speaking with immovable lips:

"Out of this, pardner! Get to your rig, man!"

It was wise advice, and the portly sport realized as much. True, he could see but those two representatives of the gang which he felt the Preacher Sport had particular cause to dread, but one word from the lips of Jim Walker might stir up other losers on the Dangler, and ugly work comes easy under cover of a general hustle.

"Give him air, gentlemen!" Martin shouted, shrewdly, as a cover to their retreat.

His ruse proved successful, and before any of those present could fairly comprehend their movement, both men were safely seated in the road wagon, ready for a start toward town.

"Three cheers for the day's who took Tim Dooley's measure so neatly!" cried one enthusiastic sport, making a plunge in that direction as he added: "Hold on, stranger! I've g't to shake—just got to!"

"Steady, gentlemen, all!" sharply cried Kasson, coat across his lap, but with a pistol in the hand which he lifted as if in depreciation. "No rushing, I humbly beg of you!"

His voice was drowned by the chorus of cheers and yells which burst from the intensely excited gathering, but that gesture, backed as it was by a very business-like revolver, checked the rush long enough for Martin Todd to cry in the tone of a Stentor:

"Go easy, friends! Can't you see that Brother Kasson is fairly overcome with shame at finding himself mixed up in a scrap?"

"Yea, verily, Brother Todd speaketh the plain truth, gentlemen," added the Preacher Sport, his face growing fairly dolorous as he

faced that uneasy mass. "I humbly pray you, brethren, detain us no longer. I am a sore sufferer from dyspepsia, and having missed my regular noon tide meal, my poor nerves are already becoming dangerously shaky! If, perchance, a trembling finger should cause a premature explosion—"

That was quite sufficient. With a now cocked revolver pointing their way, a hint to that effect was almost magical. The crowd fell back, giving the bay horse a clear path, and a touch of the lash sent him off in his long, swinging stride.

"See you later, gentlemen!" Martin Todd flung over his shoulder. "Look me up in town this evening, for I'll have a full barrel of red paint on tap, with brushes for ye all!"

Hearty cheers answered this hilarious speech, but none of the party offered to follow or give them further trouble.

Not a word passed between the pair, until a goodly distance was covered, and a turn in the road took them out of sight of the fallen pugilist and his immediate surroundings. Then, however, Martin Todd pulled up his trotter, coming almost to a dead pause, as he turned in his seat to stare squarely into that face; now more enigmatical than ever.

"Who in thunder are you, anyway?" he bluntly demanded, after that keen scrutiny was unflinchingly endured for a score seconds.

Kent Kasson gave a low, doleful sigh, his eyes drooping, his head bowing until his full beard covered the upper portion of his bosom.

"Well may you ask that, brother?" he said, gloomily. "See whither the first false step may carry weak humanity! See what evil results have followed my yielding to a touch of the old-time Adam! Was it not bad enough to enter the broad gates which lead to perdition, by way of race-course and betting booth? Was it not sufficient that I yielded to temptation when—oh, brother! cover my head with ashes! Give unto me a coat of hair-cloth, and put into my hand a many-lashed scourge!"

"I'd give you the earth for the bare asking, pardner, if I owned or could steal it!" bluntly declared the portly sport. "What have I done, then, that you're loth to trust me?"

"'Tis not what you have done, brother, but of what I've been guilty!" mourned the missionary, seemingly too deeply abashed to again encounter that honest gaze. "A public brawler! A jockey before the eyes the betting world! A bibber of wine at the open bar! A—"

"Wine be—blamed! 'Twas nothing but pop!"

Kent Kasson groaned again, in no wise comforted by that literal correction, though he certainly caught its purport, since he lamented:

"Were it to reach the ears of my loved congregation, they'd pop me so quick—oh, brother! pity me! pity me, I implore thee!"

"I couldn't if I tried, and I'd be a fool if I did!" bluntly declared the bluff sport, giving his leave to jog easily along. "Pity you, is it? Why, man, dear! I'm just envying you, instead!"

"Envy?" echoed the missionary, in mournful surprise. "Then woe be unto you, brother, for of a verity thou must have committed some terrible transgression of the moral law!"

"That's all right, pardner," with a touch of doggedness in his tones as he stared straight ahead of him. "I don't advertise as a saint, yet I've run up against heap worse sinners."

"One of whom I am which," meekly murmured his companion.

"Just as you like, pardner. But, granting you so much, I've a right to maintain my own opinion, and part of it is just this: You've done a mighty sight more good this day, than if you'd stuck to your pulpit and preached from dawn to sunset!"

"Do you—if I could only think so, brother?" sighed Kasson, by no means fully comforted, but with an ev'ry ray of light penetrating the pall of gloom which he had gathered about himself.

"I've said it once, and I'll say it again: you've done more good this day, than any hundred men inside of the Park."

"Sinners, all, and I'm the chiefest, brother."

"Well, if you haven't proven your right to be called a chief, then I'm way off my nut! I'm not talking about your knocking Tim Dooley stiff, though that is a deed a man might feel proud of for a long year without a break! I'm talking about the way you kicked over the nasty hog-killing the gang set up, back yonder!"

"Verily, brother, you talk in enigmas."

"Did'n't you tell me you used to be a regular sport, say?"

"And if I did, brother, why cast the shameful fact into my blushing face?" meekly, yet reproachfully murmured the missionary.

Once again Martin Todd squarely faced his odd companion, and after a brief look into those eyes, once more masked by the glasses, he changed his manner, saying bluntly:

"All right, pardner: I'm following your lead, lose or win. Only—How did you do the trick, with Timothy?"

Kasson Kent hesitated a bit, then slowly spoke:

"You ask terribly hard questions, Brother Todd. I wish I could explain to your satisfaction, but, the fact is something like this: moral-

ly, I was quite willing to accept a thrashing, to save your hand from shedding human blood. I saw no other way, in fact. Yet, when I faced that fallen creature in that human ring, I just—I know I laid the man of might low in the dust, but that's about all I do know!"

"Which is clear as mud! Well, I promised to follow your lead, and promise goes. I ask no living man to trust me one inch further than his own good judgment bids him."

"You are not seriously offended with me, brother?"

"No. After the good service you've done this day, I'd be worse than a hog to ask for more than you are perfectly willing to give."

"Can man bestow that which he hath not, Brother Todd?"

"Of course not. I'm past asking it, remember. Only—don't forget that you've downed a gang that never closes an account until the balance stands all in their favor. Tim Dooley is one of that gang. He does the thumping, the bouncing, the knocking down and dragging out."

"Yes. I saw a sample of his work, brother."

"I know, but don't form your judgment by that alone, pardner, or you may slip up on it, just as Timothy did, back yonder. He's a tough nut to crack, take him sober. He was full to the neck to-day. Not but that I think you could get away with him at his best, for I do think it! I'd lay my last dollar on you, in an even match, but that he'll never give you again. He'll strike you from behind, ten chances to one."

"Forewarned is forearmed, brother."

"Of the two, though, I count Jim Walker the most dangerous. He'll never give warning, but strike from cover, like a copperhead snake. He does the dirty work for the gang, when it calls for shrewdness as well as deviltry, you understand?"

"I'm trying to, Brother Todd."

"Then there's Dave Ferguson and his woman: sister, she passes for, but I'd hate to lay odds on the relationship! That makes four. Another member is a bank clerk, and he, like all the others, goes and comes at the beck or nod of Prince Hamilton."

For some little time silence fell over the pair, both of whom appeared to have ample food for thought, just then. Presently Kent Kasson gave a low sigh, as of relief, then said:

"For a man of peace, Brother Todd, this prospect is anything but exhilarating. Still, there is one comfort: by winning that race with Silver King, I surely placed one member of the gang, as you term them, under strong obligations."

"Is that so?" almost sneered the portly sport, watching his companion keenly through the corner of one eye. "May I ask that member's name, Brother Kasson?"

"Barry Nash, of course!"

Martin Todd gave a hard, dry chuckle as he touched his lag a lit.

"If you saw a flock of carrion crows gathered about a helpless lamb, Brother Kasson, would you dub that lamb crow?"

"Eh? I don't—I fail to—to catch on, brother!" stammered the missionary, with an air of bewilderment.

"In other words, you doubt my assertion?"

"Forbid the thought, Brother Todd!" hastily spoke up the other, with a deprecatory gesture.

"But I fail to—what do you mean, then?"

"Just that!" with almost vicious emphasis. "I mean that Barry Nash is like a sick lamb surrounded by a flock of hungry carrion crows: and they've stripped him of the better part of his fleece, too!"

A sorely puzzled light gleamed back of those glasses. Kent Kasson seemed trying to reconcile facts with statements, but with poor success, and like one in sheer desperation, he spoke again:

"But, surely you said the gentleman I heard called Prince Hamilton, was a member of what you term the gang?"

"He's the head and brains of the gang. The others are simply his tools. I know that much, although I might not be able to prove the whole of it in a court-room," doggedly declared the driver.

"But, I saw and heard Prince Hamilton—why, brother, he surely was on cordial terms with Barry Nash! I know he declared he was backing Silver King for nearly all he was worth! Really, sir, I cannot make the two ends meet, try my level best!"

"And yet 'tis simple as falling off a log that's been thickly greased for the occasion," bluntly asserted Todd. "There is a lady in the case, of course! There always is, I believe, when deviltry is red-hot and still a-heating! But that don't count."

"There's a lady in the case, and if you'll agree to let me set up a snug little supper in town, Brother Kasson, I'll try and give you the key you lack. Is it a bargain?"

"If—you will not force me to drink strong waters?" hesitated the missionary, eying his companion a little dubious.

"Nothing stronger than good whisky, and not even that in public, Brother Kasson," chuckled the sport, tickled by that little incident.

at the refreshment booth. "I know a cozy little place where a body can have all the comforts of a home, with all the dainties he cares to ask for, topped off with complete privacy. How does that hit you, eh?"

"Right where I live!" exclaimed the Preacher Sport, then clapping a hand over his mouth, at the same time casting a half-frightened glance around them.

"What's bit you, now, Brother Kasson?"

"Nothing, only—verily, brother, the flesh is weak, and the tongue most unruly! Time was when such worldly slang slipped all too glibly off my talking member, and now—oh-ah!"

Martin Todd gave a grunt as echo to that doleful sigh, but let the opening slip without uttering the gibe which was almost at his lips.

Since Kent Kasson saw fit to play such a part, let him enjoy his peculiar humor as best he might!

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PREACHER SPORT EXPLAINS.

The remainder of that drive was passed in almost complete silence, so far as connected conversation went. As though both felt a truce had been offered and accepted, no further allusions were made to Prince Hamilton and his gang, as Martin Todd had dubbed the "Called" Six, nor yet to the portly sport's "sick lamb," Barry Nash.

Thanks to the time lost in the squabble over the road collision, the bay trotter did not take them into the city until twilight was beginning to deepen, and both men were perfectly willing to postpone other matters in favor of the supper proposed by Martin Todd.

Driving direct to the livery-stable where he kept his rig, the good bay was turned over to a hostler, and arm in arm, the now cordial friends stepped out briskly in quest of the bon vivants' paradise so aptly epitomized by the elder sport.

As after events clearly proved, he had done no more than simple justice to "Morton's," as many a regretful sigh will testify, from those whose memory can go back to that date. Only a memory, now, but still a dear one to countless scores.

As they crossed the threshold of that unostentatious building, Martin Todd dropped the arm of the Preacher Sport, but not through shame or fear of ridicule at his choice of comrades.

He spoke a few words in gentle tones to the cashier seated in his little raised-space, and then rejoined Kent Kasson, saying, cheerily:

"It's all right, Brother Kent, and we've secured my particular."

"I don't—I hope—nothing stronger than soda, please," stammered the missionary, casting a nervous glance around the place by that "dim, religious light" which "Morton's" ever affected.

The disciple of Moses had doffed his hat, which he was pressing to his contracted chest with both hands grasping the brim. The baggy umbrella was safely tucked beneath an arm. His black coat was tightly buttoned from waist to throat, and, added to his wind-disordered beard and long hair, from the midst of which gleamed those steel-bowed spectacles, all combined to render the stranger an odd, if not actually ridiculous-looking object.

There were a few "audible smiles" from among the patrons who had already begun to flock for their evening meal, but neither of our friends gave them attention. Slipping a hand through the arm of his bewildered-seeming companion, Martin Todd quickly led the way to a side-door, then up a flight of stairs which carried them to the second floor, devoted to private rooms.

"That's all right, Jake," said Todd, to the bowing servant who opened the door for their entrance. "My order's already in, and you needn't bother about waiting, this round."

Before that broad smile had time to change under the touch of disappointed hopes, it was increased in width and depth by a goodly coin, and Jake was still expressing his voluble thanks as the door closed between.

"I took it for granted you wouldn't insist on ceremony, pardner," the genial sport said, in explanation, as he crossed the cozy little room, to open a paneled door in the wall, revealing a dumb-waiter. "I just told Henry to send me up the usual lay-out, and here's the first installment."

So far from objecting to this off-hand method of doing business, Kent Kasson appeared hugely delighted, judging from his alacrity in lending a hand. The table was ready for its load of good things, and if the result could hardly be called artistic, it well agreed with both eye and palate.

Both men were hungry, and the next few minutes were devoted to taking the keen edge off their appetite.

When this feat was fairly accomplished, Martin Todd once more visited the dumb-waiter, this time removing a tray containing two bottles, glasses, a box of cigars, together with a tiny spirit lamp and curled paper-lights.

"Nothing but 'pop,' Brother Kasson," he declared, with a twinkle in his honest blue eyes. "Luckily I caught on to your failing, and so knew how to shape my order. Shall I?"

"'Tis not—It is s—d, Brother Todd?"

"Just pop, and that proves it!" declared Martin, releasing the cork, and decanting the wine almost before that sharp report died away.

The missionary offered no further objections, but his grave visage perceptibly softened as he sipped his—pop!

There was little that could be called conversation during the first hour at table, yet that interval of time could hardly be called wasted. Apart from the enjoyment a really hungry man could find there, the perfectly cooked food and rich wine gradually changed the missionary into man once more, and as he watched this alteration for the better in a covert fashion, Martin Todd inwardly chuckled at his wisdom in so baiting his friendly trap.

When hunger was fully satiated, and the little table cleared for wine and cigars, outward seeming lied if the Sport was not above the Preacher once more!

"You really do know how to manage things, out here, pardner," Kent Kasson frankly admitted, his eyes half-closed as they peered through twin clouds of fragrant vapor. "I never struck a neater lay-out in all my experience as sport in general, and man about town!"

"Thanks! Then you don't mind admitting that you have been a full-blooded sport, Brother Kasson?"

There was a touch of malice in this query, perhaps, but Martin Todd could not refrain from letting his little quip fly, even if it should undo a portion of his painstaking work.

The younger man gave a faint sigh, and a graver expression crept over his face; but there was hardly a trace of the nasal whine left in his tones as he slowly made reply:

"Why should I deny it, Brother Todd, when my every action this unfortunate day hath so flatly betrayed me!"

"That's what I've been saying all along: why should you? Sport is printed all over you, man, dear! And only a thoroughbred could have turned the tricks you have this glad day!"

Now that the ice had been fairly broken, Kent Kasson found it less embarrassing to talk without reserve.

"'Twas all in knowing how, my dear friend," he said, with a low, amused chuckle. "That knowledge I gained in the days of my youth, when no more grave or serious thoughts than to pluck amusement as it flies, found resting-place in my brain."

"Well, I only wish I could have been so lucky in my schooling," the portly sport said, with a rueful sigh. "I could always manage to keep from getting smothered, after a rough-and-tumble fashion; but you—the way you knocked out Tim Dooley! 'Twas grand, man, just grand!"

A smile that seemed half-abashed crept into that face, and Kent Kasson meekly acknowledged that he had won and worn the middle-weight championship of his college before leaving his 'teens.

"But, let that point pass, I beg of you, Brother Todd. Once I was proud of being a better bruiser than the average of my fellows, but I've long since grown heartily ashamed of that weakness. I can fight, if I have to, but I'd far rather run away!"

"Yes you would! Just as you run away this day, though!"

Kent Kasson frowned, but dropped the subject then and there. He began abruptly, like one who feels an explanation is due another.

"It was not mere chance that led to my making your acquaintance this day, Brother Todd, although I hardly expected that acquaintance to last so long, or become so intimate."

"If it don't last longer, you'll be to blame, not me, pardner!"

"Wait; rash promises are far too often given, brother, and when you have heard me to the end, you may regret your impulsive words. Nay," as his host started to protest, "please listen to the explanation which I feel in duty bound to give. After, if you feel inclined, you may take your turn, and I'll cheerfully lend an ear."

"It's a bargain, pardner. Go on. I'm all ears, as the burro said!"

"You already know my name and my present avocation in life, Brother Todd, but my early days were passed under very different auspices. I came of a sporting race. For more generations than I care to count, just now, the men of that race have been thoroughbreds, and not one among them all was more ardently a sport than my lamented father."

"In his younger days, his most intimate companion was Norman Nash, whom you may possibly remember, for—"

"The father of Barry Nash? Well, I reckon I do remember him! And I learned to love the old gentleman, too, despite the difference in our years," said Todd, his strong voice betraying emotion.

"As my father loved him long years ago," softly said Kasson. "That friendship was never severed, although their ways divided, and for long years before death came to either, track was lost of each other. But as my father loved,

so he taught. From his lips I learned to know and to love Norman Nash."

"Never mind what terrible event it was that finally turned me from the easy if dangerous path the feet of my ancestors had trod for more than three long centuries. I did not willingly or wittingly sin, but—once more, I say let that pass!"

Kent Kasson filled his glass, emptying it at a single gulp. He brushed a hand across his brow as though to banish unwelcome memory; then spoke with greater rapidity, like one wishing to prevent possible questioning.

"Enough for the present that change my course I did, and as I was left the last of my long race, there could no one lift voice in opposition to my resolve when I openly avowed my intention of atoning as far as lay in my power for the wrongs, conscious or involuntary, my race may have committed.

"I was young, but I was deeply in earnest. I fought long, and I fought bravely, if I do say it myself. But—I sadly fear my efforts were of little avail!"

A faint, regretful sigh parted his lips, and his head bowed for a brief space. Yet, so sincere seemed his regrets, that Martin Todd could not find heart or words to interrupt him with.

"I had long forgotten Norman Nash in my new life, when the loving, tender tales told by my father's lips in those brighter, happier, if not purer years, were recalled to mind as I read the death-notice of the rich citizen of Denver."

"Yes, he died worth a mint, people said, but—go on, pardner!"

Martin Todd interrupted his own hasty speech, leaning back in his seat smoking vigorously, his jaws firmly squared.

"Just at that time, I was far too busily engaged to do more than bear the matter in mind, but even then I resolved to learn more, to find out just what condition my father's dear friend had left his children in," gravely resumed the missionary.

"It was nearly a year before I could put my resolve into execution, and then it was but imperfectly: what I was unable to do myself, I was forced to intrust to another. Still, that other proved a faithful agent, and after making a thorough investigation, brought me his report.

"He reported that Norman Nash had built up a vast fortune through speculating, mainly in mines and mining stocks. That his will divided his property equally between his two children, Barry and Ilda.

"That was the bright side of the report, but it had a dark one, as well. My agent asserted that Barry Nash had turned sport and gambler, betting boldly if not recklessly, and that so soon he had wasted the greater portion of the fortune left him by his father. Was my agent right in so reporting, Brother Todd?"

"Well, I reckon he wasn't so mighty far out," slowly, reluctantly admitted his host. "As I told you, the lad's fallen into a gang of vultures—confound them, one and all!"

"Possibly they may be worse than confounded," quietly said the missionary, with a grim smile flitting across his face. "But—the young lady: my agent could learn comparatively little in that direction. She is not—she is still single, I believe?"

"Yes, but how long that'll be the case, I'm not so mighty sure."

"The lady has suitors, then? By which I mean a favored one?"

"I don't know so mighty much about Ilda, myself," frankly admitted Todd. "I was fairly intimate with the old gentleman, but I'm a bit too rough, too free and easy in my get-up, to catch on with the fair sex. Still, I more than fancy she's engaged to young Maynard, a bank-clerk."

"What sort of fellow is he? Worthy a true-hearted maiden?"

CHAPTER XIV.

MARTIN TODD TAKES HIS TURN.

VERY quietly that question was put, but its reception was much less so. Martin Todd struck the table a sharp blow with his clinched hand, his brows gathering in an ugly scowl as he broke forth:

"Maybe he is, but I don't believe it! Confound his impudence! Must he take the very flower—you're laughing at me, pardner?"

"Far from it, Brother Todd," came the instant response. "Only, such emphasis in a still young, bale, worthy gentleman, is—"

"Drop that, unless you're bent on a row, stranger," coldly interrupted the other, flushing hotly. "I'm old enough to be Ilda's father, and she knows it, too—worse luck!"

A rueful sigh followed that ending, but Kent Kasson never permitted the ghost of a smile to creep into his grave face. Other men might have found it no easy matter to keep from laughing, so completely bad poor Martin Todd exposed his tender secret, but the Preacher Sport had a far better use for his host than to turn him into an open enemy.

"After the explanation I have given you, Brother Todd, you surely will not deem me unkindly inquisitive if I seek to learn more concerning the children of my father's dear friend?" almost weekly asked the missionary.

"Never a bit, my hearty," declared his host, quickly rallying. "And any information I may hold, you're more than welcome to."

"Thanks, brother. Then, this young gentleman—"

"Young Maynard? Arthur is his front handle."

"Again, thanks. Mr. Arthur Maynard, then: what manner of person is he, so far as your knowledge goes?"

"Just an average young man of the times," frankly admitted Todd. "I can't say there's anything particularly bad, or even obnoxious about the fellow, outside of his being a bit of a dude. He is a bit of a sport, in a timid way: hasn't any too much cash, I reckon, though, to wade in deeper than his shoe-tops."

"A bank clerk, you said? Surely not the same you alluded to as being one of Prince Hamilton's gang?"

"What, Maynard! Don't you think it, man, dear! He and the Prince hate each other worse than fire and water! The fellow I meant, though, clerks in the same bank as Maynard. His name is Tom Hinton."

Kent Kasson frowned perceptibly, shaking his head after a grave, troubled fashion.

"Gambles, eh? That's bad enough in any man, but in a bank clerk!"

"Oh, I reckon it's all on the square, pardner," Todd hastened to give assurance. "Maynard may be a dude, and none too much of a man, as rugged manhood goes, but I believe he is clean white as to the rest. If he wasn't, a girl like Ida'd never cotton to him!"

"Then you believe there is an engagement between them?"

"Now you've got me again, pardner! I wouldn't ask Maynard for the information, and of course I couldn't ask her. Still, I know for a fact that he's dead gone on the little lady, and I'm thinking she's mighty nigh as deep struck with him."

There was a brief silence, during which both men appeared powdering over that particular point, but when Kent Kasson broke the silence, it was to give the conversation a different tinge.

"You have no serious objection against telling me more of what you know concerning Prince Hamilton and his gang, I trust, Brother Todd?"

"Why should I have? You're trying to befriend Barry Nash, I'm sure, and that's just where I need more help. You'll give it, pardner?"

"Yes, if such assistance lies in my power."

"Well, if you'll keep on doing as well as you've begun this day, I'll never grumble," said Todd, with a short laugh. "You've saved the boy a few thousands, and I do reckon he begins to feel the need of them, too, worse luck!"

"Surely not?" with undisguised amazement.

"My agent reported—"

"That Norman Nash left the lad something over a million in cash and paying mines; just so," grimly cut in his host. "So he did, and while the mines are still solid, to the best of my belief, the cash has pretty well taken to itself wings—and I know right where to look for most of the feathers, too!"

"The gang has fleeced him, then?"

"Right and left, up and down, top and bottom, without the slightest show of mercy. You saw a specimen of their work to-day. Ferguson made the match wit' Toe Dolger against Silver King, for five thousand a side, but the gelding really belongs to the Prince, and his money did most of the outside betting, as well as furnished the stake money."

"You believe they bought up the driver?"

"The way you handled the King proves that, to a dead moral. Hiram Fitch is as good a driver as ever came to score, and Silver King never before cut up rusty with Hi holding the ribbons. Then—what other interpretation can be placed upon it?"

"Barry Nash would not, or could not, see it in that light."

"No, because he's too confoundedly honest himself, bless the fool boy," grumbled Todd, with a dark scowl. "If he wasn't, would he let that slippery Prince Hamilton honey-sugle him as he does? And him with both hands elbow-deep in the boy's pockets?"

"If Hamilton openly bets against Nash—"

"But that's right where he keeps his hold, don't you see, man, dear? He doesn't bet against Barry in the open. He plays copper, so to speak, and if you was to ask him, Nash would take his oath Hamilton has lost a little mint of money backing his hard luck!"

"A dangerous friend, truly, Brother Todd, and from what I have this day seen of young Nash, I'm afraid he will be hard to save from the toils of these men of Belial. Still, there is one satisfaction: Barry can only waste his own substance, and while his sister lives, her brother surely will never come to actual want."

"You may be right as to the lad, but—how about the Prince?"

"He may be cunning as Satan himself, yet surely he can never imperil the welfare of Miss Nash?"

"If by welfare, you mean her fortune, that's where you're way off, pardner," said Todd, with gloomy amusement over the density of his new-

found friend. "The Prince is going for all there is in sight, and if he's left free to work his traverse, he'll come home mighty nigh to raking in the entire boodle, too!"

A gleam of comprehension flashed into that grave face, and Kent Kasson spoke more sharply than customary:

"What! you mean he is after the heiress, too?"

"And her fortune, yes, confound him! Mind you, pardner, part of what I tell you I'm merely guessing at, though I'd lay long odds I'm not far from the bull's-eye; but part of it I know through positive information, given me by one whom I know I can trust, through thick and thin."

"A detective?"

But, apparently, Martin Todd was not prepared to answer that blunt question, since he passed it by as though never uttered.

"And having said so much, I'll say still more, in confidence, of course, pardner!"

"I give my word, Brother Todd."

"And that's good as the next man's bond, or I'll never try to read human character again. Now, this is pretty much the way of it: The gang is fleecing Barry Nash, fast as they can work the trick, without too openly exposing their trickery. The heaviest of their winnings come across the faro-table, of course; a fellow can get to the devil quicker by such a route than any other I know of, and I'll not except poker!"

"I told you there was a woman in the outfit; Dave Ferguson passes her off as his sister. She may be one, but I'd lay long odds to the contrary. Still, that makes no material difference with the main facts."

"This woman, Mattie Ferguson, is as slick a hand at the box as any dealer you ever ran up against, but she don't turn a card in public; oh, no! she's too 'way-up for anything more vulgar than a select party, in their private rooms. I've been there, and so I know," breaking off with a laugh that had a touch of rough humor in it.

For several minutes, now, Kent Kasson had been fidgeting uneasily in his chair, and he quickly caught at the opportunity afforded by this break to exclaim:

"Bless my soul! I forgot—my agent—I promised to meet him at six by the clock, and here it is—Pardon, brother, but I really must tear myself away, forthwith."

"But, man, dear, I was just going to tell you the way they play the trick on the lad, and—"

"I've been there, brother," declared the Preacher Sport, with a lugubrious shake of the head over which he was drawing the battered tile. "There was a smiling siren in my case, as well! And when I tore my body free, 'twas at the sacrifice of my fleece."

Despite his chagrin at having his story cut short so abruptly, Martin Todd could not help laughing at that doleful tone, those abashed movements. If nothing, then Kent Kasson had learned his part well.

"Well, if you must tear yourself away, of course I can't hinder you, pardner," he said, also rising to his feet, but quickly adding as the idea struck his fancy: "What's to binder my going along, though?"

Kent Kasson gave an involuntary start at this unexpected proposition, and his face for once betrayed its master. Martin Todd was far from being a fool, and noting that swift change of countenance, he as quickly retrieved himself.

"Come to think, I've a little engagement of my own, though, and that lets us both out, pardner," he said, blithely, picking up his hat and moving toward the door. "Sorry to part, Brother Kasson, but it is not for all-time, I trust?"

"You but anticipate my own hope, Brother Todd. May I call upon you in the morning, to hear the remainder of your story?"

There was a suppressed earnestness in his tones as he uttered the words that favorably impressed Todd, and all resentment vanished from his mind that moment.

"I'll be more than glad to see you, sir," giving Kasson a card as he added: "That is my hotel, where I room. I'll be there to-night, and I'll wait breakfast for you in the morning. Unless, indeed, you can come there for lodging, as well?"

"Thanks, brother, and I'll drop in, since I've no room engaged as yet. This hotel has one unequalled recommendation, at least: it can boast of a true gentleman and sport for its guest!"

Martin Todd bore Kasson company to the street, where they parted, each going his own way.

That of the Preacher Sport, led him into Arapahoe street, yet, briskly though his steps were taken, his appointment did not hinder him from pausing before the brilliantly illuminated windows of "Tammens," that unique aggregation of rare attractions.

Filled though the show windows were with tastefully arranged specimens of our mineral, vegetable and animal treasures, one could not pause long there, while so much more of deep interest was to be viewed in the building itself.

Kent Kasson entered, and spent the better part of an hour inspecting those wonderful exhibits of nature's choicest productions, and he might have spent the entire night after the

same fashion, then taken his departure without having seen the half there was to interest and even entrance.

There are larger rooms, vaster collections, but one must travel far and search long before meeting with a choicer, purer treat to eye and mind than is presented by Tammens' Curiosity Shop.

It was with difficulty that the Preacher Sport tore himself away from that spot, and only then through mentally promising himself another visit to Tammens', when his time was less limited.

He turned his back on the Curiosity Shop, following Arapahoe street for several blocks, then turned into a less brightly lighted street, one hand mechanically moving to make sure his pistols were convenient to his hand in case of need.

That motion was inspired by the thought of Prince Hamilton's gang, and particularly those members to whom he had given especial occasion for hatred. True, they might never trouble him again, provided he kept to himself and meddled not in their affairs; but the warning given him by Martin Todd was still fresh in his memory.

"It's gloomy enough to give even a cur like Jim Walker courage sufficient for stabbing—Hello!"

A sharp cry for help rung through the night, coming from the gloom only a few rods ahead of the Preacher Sport!

CHAPTER XV.

PRINCE HAMILTON AND HIS ALLIES.

AT that time, in common with nearly every city and town lying west of the Mississippi River, to speak amply within bounds, Denver showed no marked hostility to "The Tiger" and its votaries. So long as the establishment was conducted in a fairly decent manner, gambling rooms were allowed to run with open doors, and all who cared to cross their thresholds were free to do so at will.

One of the best appointed places of this sort was "run" by David Ferguson, and there were many who felt free to assert "Reddy" was just coining money out of his venture, too.

Be that as it may, the proprietor wore anything but a contented smile on his broad, red-bearded visage on this, the evening following the signal defeat of The Dodger by Silver King.

In company with the woman who was, or who passed for, his sister, and Prince Hamilton, David Ferguson was seated at the little cloth-covered table in one of his cozily furnished private rooms, under the same roof as the public tables, but entirely disconnected with that resort, so far as sight or hearing could tell.

Of the trio, Mattie Ferguson alone appeared in usual mood. The Prince was a bit paler than ordinary, and his gravity caused his handsome face to seem years older than customary.

Ferguson even more plainly betrayed the strain to which they all had been subjected that day, and as he pored over the paper on which he had been figuring, curses both deep and bitter dropped from his practiced tongue.

"Ob, strike another tune, Dave, even if it doesn't sound quite so sweet to your ears," said the woman, with languid impatience.

"You're fond enough of what money fetches, I reckon."

"Of course, else I'd be no woman; but, contrary and unreasonable as you're so fond of calling our sex, we're above the petty weakness of expecting to win every turn of the cards, King David."

"If you knew just how hard we've been hit to-day!"

"Maybe I can give a near enough guess, my red-headed divinity," the woman cut in, showing a little more animation than before. "But, what matter, as long as we keep the ring in his nose? 'Twill all flow back again, bringing more in its company. You know that, Prince!"

"I know I wish your tongue coined pearls and precious stones, Mat, but you're hardly a princess of that rare sort, though you be queen of our hearts, and empress over our souls," said Hamilton, with a half-smile coming into his gloomy face just then.

"Which is the polite for bidding me hold my tongue, of course?"

"Well, something like it, my dear girl. Not for all time, you understand, but merely until your turn comes 'round."

"Speak when you're spoken to!"

With that quotation, Miss Ferguson leaned back in her cushioned chair, deftly rolling a cigarette and igniting it at her leisure.

"What's the figures, Reddy?" asked the Prince, turning toward his right-hand man, that curious appearance of age once more settling over his finely cut features.

"You can count on being out that much, for dead sure," growled Ferguson, passing the paper across the table. "There'll be some changes to make, beyond a doubt, but they'll add to, not lessen, the sum total."

Hamilton frowned blackly as he noted the result of that figuring. A low, soft whistle of surprise parted his lips, for he had greatly underestimated the truth in his guess at the amount of losses.

"Counts up, don't it, pardner?" grimly asked

Ferguson, leaning back in his chair, the better to take note of that changing countenance. "You said to snatch at any and all bets, no matter what the odds might be on the gelding. Well, of course we couldn't collar 'em *all*, but I reckon we caught a polite sufficiency. Eh?"

"For one day, yes," quietly assented the Prince, dropping the paper on the table, as though he had no further use for it. "Of course I knew we were in the hole, but I hardly thought it was this deep."

"'Twas mighty hot work while it lasted, but if you wish to go over each item, sir, I reckon we can show vouchers for them all."

There was a growing sulkiness in his tones that Hamilton was too acute to miss noting, and his manner instantly changed to one more agreeable.

"Steady, old boy! If I thought you were trying to deal me crooked, would I be talking to you after this fashion?"

"Of course I'd hate to have you think that way of me, Prince, but you really looked as though you meant it, just then."

"No worse than I'd hate to have you think it, pardner, and if I happened to look that way, as you term it, my face lied on my thoughts."

"Talk about women chewing wind to tatters!" murmured Miss Mattie, with perfect distinctness, despite the dreamy, far-away expression worn by her rich, voluptuous face.

"Take a pinch of salt, Mat," gruffly growled her reputed brother.

"Fresh or not, Mattie is pretty near right," admitted the Prince, frankly. "I called you here on business, and the quicker we get our share of it over, the sooner we'll be ready to hear the rest of the gang report."

"I've handed in mine," said Ferguson, with a nod toward the figure-covered paper. "In the rough, of course, but I'll smooth it all out tomorrow. That will answer, of course."

"Of course," bowed the Prince, lighting himself a fresh cigar. "Now, what can you tell me about that odd-looking rascal who took the place of Hi Fitch?"

"And who robbed us of a little mint, curse him!" viciously growled the gambler, striking the table with his fist until the glasses rang.

"Curse him, with all my heart," chimed in Miss Ferguson, then adding in a tone of admiration: "But—didn't he know how to drive, though!"

"To my sorrow," grimly acquiesced the Prince. "But it wasn't his praises I wished sung, so much as his pedigree ventilated. You looked it up, Dave?"

"I tried to, but had little more than my labor for my pay."

"Give me that little, then, as a starter," frowned the prince.

"Well, Mart Todd recommended him to the judges, and gave his name as Kasson. Todd swore he was an old hand at the ribbons, and pledged his word that he'd give the backers of Silver King a fair, square deal for their good money."

"Nothing better than that, Dave?"

"That's the best I could do, on such short notice, Prince."

"I caught as much, flying through the air, even before the last heat was trotted," coldly retorted Hamilton. "You're a good man, David, and I'd hate to lose you from the list, but you want to get a livelier hustle on you while working for my wages. Sabe?"

"Can a fellow do better than his best?"

"Not always, though he can when it's that or go under. That sort of man don't chip in a game like ours, without he means mischief, and I've got to know just who and what he is—just got to know!"

"As to what he is, that's easy as falling in love," drawled Miss Ferguson, with a sleepy flash of her lustrous eyes from one face to the other. "He's a detective!"

"On what lay?"

"Oh, I'm not playing prophetess, Prince," with a soft laugh. "How, then, can you expect me to single out the particular transgressor of ours—or yours—the saintly gentleman is investigating?"

"If he'd arrest your tongue, Mat, I don't know as I'd kick at anything else," growlingly observed Ferguson. "You blab too mighty much!"

"It's the privilege vested in her sex, David, so let it pass as incurable, and get back to business. You're dead sure old Todd started this nasty racket, to-day?"

"I know that he was one of the first and loudest kickers. I know that he took a chief part in calling Hi Fitch down, and that he was the first to propose this Kasson, as he calls himself. I know, too, that when the judges saw the fellow, they wanted to back out of giving him the seat, but Todd got a lot of the loud kickers to back him up, and—well, you know how it panned out!"

"Set it down against Todd, then, and mark it quick payment."

"It's already down, be sure! But I'm afraid we'll find this Kasson fellow is a tougher nut to crack, in the end. You saw how coolly he turned up after that knife missed its mark, and—"

"Who threw it?"
"You tell, for I can't!"
"Who was the fellow who tried to shoot Kasson, then?"

"I'll never tell you, for I don't know. Some one who thought he was betting on the best nag, I reckon, and when he saw his hopes go glimmering, turned crazy-mad at his losses."

The Prince gazed keenly into that bushily-bearded face during this off-hand explanation—which, after all, explained nothing—but if David Ferguson knew more than his tongue cared to admit, that face did not betray its master.

Hamilton, satisfied or not, asked no further questions on that point, but returned to the matter of the oddly-made-prominent driver.

"'Twas as pretty a hog-killing as mortal man ever planned!" he muttered, with an ugly scowl marring his face the while. "'Twas a lead-pipe cinch, after we bought Fitch over! If all had run along as we calculated—as it surely ought to have run—by this time our dear friend Barry would be deep in the hole, puzzling his mate of a brain bow he was to pull himself out again!"

"And all kicked over by a strolling, country-school-house preacher!" languidly sighed the fair Mattie.

"Satan toast him for supper!" fiercely burst forth the Prince, taking fire at the allusion. "I never thought I could learn to hate a man worse than I've learned to hate Barry Nash, but—I'll pay this canting knave out in full, if it takes a lifetime!"

"Provided he hasn't skipped out, Prince."

Instantly Hamilton regained a portion of his usual coolness, and his mustaches curled viciously as he turned upon Ferguson.

"I've taken measures to guard against anything of that sort, pardner. I set Jim Walker on his track, and I expect him to report here this evening. We'll see if he had better luck than fell to your share, David."

"I hope he will, but don't forget that you gave me an altogether different lead, Prince. It may be hard work to track a cunning devil like this Kasson, but it's harder still to follow his scent backward."

"I know it. I'm not blaming you for finding out so little, old fellow, so don't keep spurring at my ribs. As for Jim: well, you know his caliber, I reckon."

"I'd ought to, for he's served me long enough. The Old Boy himself couldn't throw Jimmy off the scent, once he fairly takes it. If any one man can, he'll run the rascal to his den, and then it'll go hard if he can't even up with him for the awful dump he gave us, this day!"

"There is one bit of consolation left us," observed Hamilton, after a brief period of thought. "Barry Nash never cottoned to the knave. He hates him fully as bad as we do, and more than that's needless!"

"Yet, a man feels pretty acutely in his pocket, gentlemen," quietly observed Miss Ferguson. "Kasson, if that's his present title, saved our sweet boy a neat little pile of ducats. When his mad fit fades, as it must in time, won't Barry soften toward that benefactor?"

"You think?"

"I know that old Todd is stuck on the girl, and hence has a mighty tender spot for the brother. That being granted, how long will it be before he hits you right where you live, Prince?"

"I'll never give him the chance," sternly declared Hamilton. "I'll watch Nash, and if he shows signs of turning that way, in preference to me, his truest, best friend, I'll shut down on Todd—for keeps!"

Dave Ferguson frowned, shifting uneasily on his chair.

"That'd be more than dangerous, Prince, and you'd ought to know it!" he declared, almost sharply. "A stranger like this Kasson might turn up a stiff, without causing much row, but a man so well-known as Martin Todd—that's a mighty different thing!"

"I know that, too, and really have little fears 'twill come to laying him out cold. Barry Nash believes I'm his best friend, and I reckon I can hold his faith against more than old Todd can offer. Still, if it should come to the tight pinch, I'd never stick at doing him up."

Just then a rap sounded at the door, and Hamilton muttered:

"Dollars to cents, that's Jimmy, with a full report, already!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TIM DOOLEY WANTS ANOTHER CHANCE.

DAVE FERGUSON turned his head toward the door, to sharply utter:

"Come in, if you know the trick; if you don't, stay out!"

The fastening was overcome at once, and the barrier swung wide enough to give admittance to two figures. The foremost was that of James Walker, and close behind him followed a burly shape which could only belong to the ex-pugilist, Timothy Dooley.

Mattie Ferguson had lifted her supple form to a more decorous posture as that signal sounded through the room, but as her bright eyes caught sight of that terribly-battered face, she burst into a hearty laugh, one white, bejeweled hand pointing it out as she cried:

"Will you look at that, now! Talk of the vanity of women; did ever one among us paint so liberally?"

"'Tis you foar a joke, ma'am," grinned Dooley, giving a clumsy bow and a scrape, holding his hat against his broad chest with both hands.

"Joke, is it, Dooley? Well, if a mere jest turns you into a picture of beauty like that, good earnest ought to flatten you out like an entire landscape!"

"You've been fighting, Tim?" sharply demanded the Prince.

"Oi've bin thryin' to do that same, sor, but divil a much did Oi do but take what was offered, sor," somewhat sheepishly admitted the pugilist, bowing and scraping again.

"Who done you up? Surely not any one man?"

"'Twas ownly the wan Oi c'u'd count, foar the quickness av him, sor, but av Oi was abn me confession, sor, 'tis a gang av them bigger nor than from hayre to yandther, faith!"

With a gesture of hot impatience, the Prince resumed the seat he had left so hastily as that unexpected vision greeted his eyes. He saw that Tim Dooley, either through reluctance to lessen his oft-boasted prowess, or from mental confusion born of his evident thrashing, was in no condition to give a clear, brief statement of facts.

"What has he been trying to do with himself, Walker?" he asked, nodding toward the decoy.

"Well, he tried to do up that odd-looking sharp, Kasson—"

"What? Kasson didn't pound him like that? Not by his lonesome?"

"Sure an' he did, sor, but 'tisn't in the loikes av him to do it anither toime, be gobs! An' av ye'll say Dooley, me b'y'e, go t'ump the stoofin' out av him ag'in, sure 'tis Tim Dooley that'll joomp at the chance, sor, wid thank ye in the larg'in, sor!"

"Button up!" sharply commanded his master, with a dark frown at the volubly spluttering thug. "Go on, Jimmy. Kasson did this job, you say? How, and when? Not alone, surely?"

"Mart Todd was backing him up, Prince, but only Kasson, if that's his name, touched Dooley. You know what you told me: to keep an eye on his nibs, to follow him wherever he went, and to take your team if, as you seemed to suspect, he meant to leave the Park ahead of the crowd."

"I know all that; go on."

"Well, I ran up against Tim, here, and as there were a couple of 'em, I thought it'd be no more than fair if I took a mate. Then, too, if they should leave the Park, of course Todd would take his rig. I couldn't keep track of them on foot, but if I took your span, alone, what was I to do if they struck out afoot, after-reaching town? With the horses on my hands, and I alone, they'd surely give me the slip, if I tried it on, don't you see, sir?"

"To simmer it down, Jimmy got threw!" languidly commented Mattie Ferguson, whose bright eyes had been carefully studying that face.

"Is she right in her guess, Walker?"

"I'm mighty sorry to say it, Prince, but she's just that," admitted the spy, with open reluctance.

Hamilton gave vent to a curse of disappointment, but then said:

"Through no rank fault of yours, I'm hoping, Jimmy?"

"You can judge for yourself, sir. I may have made a mistake, but it was while trying to turn things more your way."

"Go on, and boil it down, Jimmy."

Taking that quiet hint, Walker gave a tolerably accurate account of his adventures while trying to follow instructions. He told how he saw Martin Todd and the odd-looking stranger taking their departure from the Park, evidently bound for the city. He told how, hurriedly hitching up the Prince's favorite team, he and Dooley had followed after, and fancying they saw a rare chance to in part pay off the debt Kent Kasson had placed them under, how they tried it on.

"We thought we could take a wheel, and then down the preacher for causing the accident by his clumsiness; but—it didn't pan out just that way," with a meaning nod toward the battered pugilist.

"Kasson thumped Dooley, do you mean?"

Not a little relieved by seeing his master take matters so coolly, outwardly, at least, Walker proceeded with his narrative, sticking fairly close to the facts, but dropping in a bit of favorable coloring to his side whenever he thought he might do so without running too great risk of detection.

Hamilton frowned blackly at mention of his wrecked wagon, but his brows cleared somewhat when assured that his road favorites had escaped without injury.

Jimmy Walker made the most of the manner in which Martin Todd had caught the drop on them, while they were busy saving the horses, and took particular pains to explain how the gathering of the inquisitive crowd had forced them into giving the enemy fair play thereafter.

With strong interest, the principal conspira-

tors listened to his graphic picture of the brief fight which followed, but, knowing Tim Dooley as they did, it was by no means easy to credit his defeat, even with that terribly cut and bruised figure-head as additional witness.

"Knocked out! Tim Dooley?" exclaimed Dave Ferguson, in blank amazement, for no man knew better than he what heavy punishment the Irishman could stand while in the ring.

"Twas bad whisky done it, thin, sor," growled the pugilist, as a feeble defense. "Twas me that was full to the nick, sor, the day, an' thin—devil blow slack loime up his britches! Who was to t'ink the loikes av him wor a foighter, thin? An' him with his hat on! An' him luukin' more loike a walkin' schare-crow wid—ow-wow! the desavin' thase av the wourld!"

"But the plain facts remain: he did thrash you, Timothy?"

"Him an' the whisky, ma'am," sheepishly admitted the thug.

"But, you surely marked him, first, Dooley?" cut in Hamilton.

"Twas on the knuckles av him, thin, sor, wid the moog av me," Tim Dooley retorted, with a sulky grin on his injured face as a stumpy forefinger touched it to point his meaning the more clearly.

"And you let him give you the slip, after all, Jimmy?" asked the Prince, turning a frowning look upon the decoy.

"How could I help it, boss? Tim was laid out, cold as an iron wedge. The wagon was broken down, and I had your span to care for. Then, too, before I could fairly believe Dooley was knocked out, the pair of 'em was in Todd's rig, the stranger sport with a brace of guns in his fists, as he warned the whole crowd to rest satisfied with what they'd already had for their free admission. And one of his guns—the bore looked wide as a tunnel, sir!"

"He cowed you, to put you on a level with Timothy," laughingly remarked Miss Ferguson, her sense of humor apparently on top this night. "Well, do you know, gentlemen all, I'm awfully afraid that I'll find myself tumbling in love with this Mr. Kasson, up to my ears!"

"If you'd only take a tumble to yourself, it'd be more to the purpose, Mat," growlingly retorted Ferguson.

"To boil it down, then, you lost your game?" asked the Prince.

"For the time being, yes, but I'll pick it up again, or forfeit my wages twice over," came the quick response.

"You think you can do that, after the exhibition Kasson has given us all, this day?"

"Unless he has skippeil town before you say I can go look him up, Prince, I'll engage to run him to his hiding-place before another night comes down," was the quietly-confident reply.

"You are not afraid to tackle him, then?"

"Not after my own fashion, sir. I'm no slugger, as you know. I'd be worse than a fool to think of doing what Tim Dooley slipped up on; but I'll engage to find this Kasson, and report to you where he hangs out. Or," hesitating for a couple of seconds, "I'll engage to lay him out for all time, if you say that's what it must come to."

Quietly as he spoke, none who heard him, for an instant doubted the entire sincerity of the decoy. He would commit murder if given the office, but he would do it after his own treacherous fashion.

"Well, let that flea stick by the wall for now," quickly spoke the Prince, turning his gaze upon the battered face of the pugilist, who was fidgeting uneasily on his feet during all this talk.

"And you let that gangling, fall-to-pieces booby, thrash you on even terms, Tim Dooley?"

"Av anry mahn save you, sor, was to say that same, 'tis a dirthy loier Oi'd be afther callin' him, sor! 'Twas moighty onaaren terms, be gobs, an' me full to the neck wid bad whisky, thin!"

"Still, you were knocked out?"

"Foor the foorst toime, sor, an' that toime's the lasht, d'ye moind, now?" earnestly declared the pugilist, coming a bit closer in his ardor.

This brought him more fully under the light shed by the chandelier, and for a brief space Hamilton gazed in mute wonder at that ugly face.

Softened through hard drinking and irregular living in other material respects, every blow delivered by the Preacher Sport had cut through the skin, leaving grimly significant evidence as to the might of his arm.

"I've seen you in the squared circle time and again, Dooley, but I never saw you so thoroughly marked as now; not even when you basted big Johnny Durgin. You look fit only for the hospital, man!"

"Augh! 'tis but sbkin dape, sor, an' in a wake from this, niver a wan o' ye'll know 'twas struck Oi was, sure! 'Twas abl the whisky, sor, an' av ye'll say 'tis Tim Dooley may have the foorst chance at the dirthy scut, Oi'll be tankin' ye the longest day ever dawned, faith!"

"You're not afraid to tackle Kasson again, Dooley?"

"Afraid, is it, sor? Tim Dooley, afraid!

Augh! 'tis jokin' ye be, the whoile, Misther Hamilton!"

"He knocked you out, without your giving him so much as a scratch to remember you by, yet you still have faith you can do him, Tim?"

"Faith, is it, sor? Oi'm ahl faith, thin! Oi'm the b'y kin t'ump the dirthy joskin anny way he loikes it bist, sor! In the ring, out av the ring, rules galore, or rough-an'-tumble, Oi'm his betther, be gouies! An' 'tis to prove as much that Oi'm goin' down on the two hunkers a7 me, Misther Hamilton! 'Tis to beg ye'll grant me laave to thry it abo wan moor toime, sor! Jist the weenty wan, d'ye moind, now?"

"And if I say you may tackle him, Dooley, and he should thump you again, just as he eurely did this day?"

"Av the loikes av that wor to happen, sor, 'tis not Tim Dooley w'u'd be aloive long enough to hear ye laughin' at his mither's son, faith! 'Tis did he'd be, t'rough shame at disgracin' his trainin', sor! But grant me the wan weenty chance, sor, an' devil roast me av Oi don't lay the blame av this t'umpin' ahl on the bad whisky, sor!"

Prince Hamilton did not give an immediate decision, but bent his head upon a hand, seemingly pondering over the skein which had so suddenly grown tangled, so contrary to his confident expectations.

Naturally enough he had made no provisions against an interference such as this. No human foresight could have anticipated such an event, and even more than the loss of his money, Prince Hamilton regretted the coming into his bold, wicked, desperate game of this Preacher Sport.

James Walker stood by in watchful silence. While ready to carry out orders to the best of his ability, he would by no means mourn it Tim Dooley should be granted the chance he asked for, in hopes of redeeming his reputation as a slugger of the first rank.

That silence did not last long, but when he lifted his head to break the pause, Prince Hamilton had reached a decision, and spoke out plainly enough:

"All right, Dooley. You shall have your chance. Find Kasson, and lay him out: kill him, if you can do that without too greatly risking your neck. I'm not quite ready to have you hanged, old fellow!"

"Whoo-roo, an' tin thousan' t'anks to yer abnner, sor!" spluttered the pugilist, moving toward the door. "Oi'll find him this noight, sor! Oi'll not laave a sound bone in his body, be gouies!"

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ORDER ANTICIPATED.

"VERY well, Dooley. You can take that as your share of the work, then, and if you do your share as a man of your mettle ought to do it, I'll never kick because your wages come big."

"Tis pure love Oi'm worrin' foor, sor, whoile this purthy moog av me lacks paymint. The tap o' the evenning to the blissed lot o' ye, ladies an' gentlement. 'Tis Tim Dooley that's in too big a roosh for to sthand on sarrymoony, but—whooroooh!"

Finding himself unable to take the graceful leave for which he was making the effort, the seemingly delighted pugilist turned and left the council-chamber with a blundering rush.

"Another good man gone wrong," murmured Miss Ferguson, turning her dainty fingers to manufacturing a fresh cigarette.

"Whisky will knock the best of them out, and Dooley has had his full share of honors," observed her brother.

"Just so be really plays even with this infernal enigma, it's precious little I care for the rest of his career."

"Of course one whipping don't make or mar, but in case Timothy really should happen to run up against this deliciously mysterious gentleman in black of ours, with anything like an equal show, I wouldn't mind investing a little dust on the stranger: at decent odds, of course, you know," provokingly drawled the woman, who appeared bent on making herself disagreeable to her companions that evening, if possible.

Dave Ferguson began to show his teeth, but the Prince checked him.

"Don't chafe, David. Let the dainty kitten have her romp."

"But she's getting too pesky impudent for any sort of use!"

"Well, if she does too much, we'll serve her as we would any other cat; take her by the neck, and pitch her outside," coolly said Hamilton, then turning to Walker with a sharp question:

"How about Nash's great Unknown, Jimmy?"

"You mean the foot-racer, Prince?"

"Of course. Have you had time to look that little matter up?"

"I took time since you asked it, sir."

The answer came promptly enough, so far as words went, yet there was a certain air of uneasy doubt about the decoy, that one so keen of perception as Prince Hamilton could hardly pass over without note.

His gathering frown plainly betrayed the ugly

doubt which was taking possession of his mind, but Hamilton merely asked:

"What have you to report, Jimmy? Surely not another bit of botch-work like this Kasson job?"

"No, sir. I've done all you asked me to do, and maybe a bit more."

"Too much is sometimes worse than not enough, Jimmy."

"I know, sir, but I hardly think it's that way with me, now," came the clearer, freer response. "May I ask you one question, Mr. Hamilton?"

"What is it?"

"You've made a foot-race with young Nash, and—"

"Ferguson has, you mean, Jimmy."

"I stand corrected, your honor! Well, this match is play or pay, I understand?"

"Play or pay, and the money all up," curtly said the Prince, in confirmation.

A quick smile flitted across the thin, sharp face of the spy, and it was plain to all eyes that this confirmation of his belief was very pleasing to his ears, just then.

"I could have taken oath to that effect, Prince, but it's always best to make sure of all points. And now, I'll report: Kit Pottleman is in town!"

"You are dead sure, Jimmy?" asked Hamilton, his scowl growing both deeper and darker, while Dave Ferguson made no attempt to stifle the ugly curse which sprung to his lips at mention of that name.

"I'll take my oath, Prince. Of course, I can't say to a dead certainty that Kit is the Unknown, but when we stop to count up the very few sprinters on this side of the big pond, who have any license to tackle Ted Coulton on the cinder-path, don't it look just the least mite suspicious, when so good a sprinter as Pottleman hits the same burg, and keeps himself so mighty shady?"

"It is Pottleman, Jimmy? You've not made a mistake, or jumped to that conclusion, to save trouble for yourself?"

"Is that my usual style, Prince?"

"I'll do you the credit to admit not, Walker," and an odd smile came into the blonde face opposite. "Granted that Kit Pottleman is in town, and allowing that he really is the man Barry Nash had in view when he agreed to back an unknown against Ted Coulton for an even hundred yards, play or pay, what of it?"

"Did you ever see Kit in a race, Hamilton?" gruffly asked Ferguson.

"Not that I remember, no. Why do you ask, David?"

"I thought not!" sinking back in his seat with an air of fierce disgust. "The devil's kicking over the whole lay-out, and that means another throw-down, mighty nigh as bad as to-day's pudding!"

"Is that so?"

"Well, sir, Kit can run all around our man," ventured Walker, who had been closely studying the face of his employer. "I reckon that's what bothers Ferguson."

"Run all around Coulton?"

"Just that, sir!"

"Provided he cares to do so, hadn't you better add, dear friends?"

Dave Ferguson gave a start, his broad face lighting up as he caught the full force of that sentence: but Walker grew graver instead.

"You mean you're fixed for a double, Hamilton?" eagerly asked the gambler. "I know you counted on something of the sort, as a sure clincher, but I thought Nash kept his Unknown a dead secret?"

"Well, my hard will never show in the matter, for with what I have in view, I couldn't afford to run that great a risk. Still, the job is jobbed, and if he never lost before, Kit Pottleman will surely come up too late for tape-breaking, this bout!"

As he uttered these words in a tone of thinly veiled triumph, the Prince glanced mockingly toward the spy, but he misinterpreted the expression of gravity with which that face was marked.

"Don't take it too much to heart, Jimmy," he said, with a subdued chuckle. "I really meant to leave the business in your hands, but a bit of accidental luck brought the chance my way, and of course I had to pin it fast when the chance offered. See?"

"How did you manage it, pardner?" asked Ferguson, eagerly.

"Through Coulton, of course. He told me how he happened to find out who the Unknown really was, and after that the job was too easy!"

"May I speak, Mr. Hamilton?"

"That's what you're here for, Jimmy. What is it?"

"You knew who the Unknown was, then, when you gave me my orders?"

"Of course."

"And you knew then, what you know now, that Pottleman can run all around Coulton, at a hundred yards?"

"I knew all that, too. Come down to solid business, Jimmy."

"Well, Prince, if you place your trust in buying a printer, you're mighty apt to find yourself in the hole! I'd lay my head, if any one

cared to take the bet, that Kit means to play the 'double cross' on you!"

"That's why I set you on his track," coldly retorted Hamilton. "I pay you to guard against that very trick, my dear friend. And now it's my turn to ask a question: what have you done about it?"

"Nothing, sir."

"What? Is that what I pay you for? Curse you for a—"

The Prince cut himself short, for there was a faint light coming into the face of his henchman, that gave him an inkling of a little ruse on the same order as the one he had brought into play but a few minutes earlier.

"You're holding something back, Jim Walker," he said, instead of completing that ugly sentence. "What is it?"

"A little question, sir," with feigned meekness came the response.

"All ears open: now—fire away!"

"I just wished to ask you, sir, if you'd grow hot under the collar in case an accident should happen to come Pottleton's way?"

"Hurrah for Jimmy, the Wise!"

Miss Ferguson had once more roused herself sufficiently to chip in, with her usual acuteness.

"Hot?" echoed the Prince, his blue eyes catching an ugly fire as he added: "On the contrary, I'd feel so thankful that I'd give a neat stake to the man who brought me the news!"

Walker drew a long breath of relief at this blunt declaration, and from that instant all trace of doubt and embarrassment left him. He knew his ground, now, and could advance without feeling each foot of the way lest he meet a dangerous pit-fall.

"That's all right, then, Prince. As you know, I've had my hands right smart full, of late days, but I didn't forget your instructions. I did my level, but it was only this evening, since the big race at the Park, that I got my first hint as to the double-cross."

"Why are you here, then?" sharply demanded his employer. "I reckoned I'd made all sure with both men, but if you've picked up such a nasty hint as that, you'd ought to have sense enough to know that only one thing lay open to you."

"And that one thing is—what, sir?" quietly asked Walker.

"To make sure Kit Pottelman never comes to the scratch when the race is called, of course, you blockhead!"

Once again that shrewd, cunning smile warned the Prince that he might possibly be going too far and too fast, thanks to his unstrung nerves, sorely shaken as they had been by the unlooked-for "upset" of the day.

Still, Jimmy Walker was beyond taking offense from one who paid so liberally as the handsome sport, and his answer came, mild as new milk.

"Too fast is often worse than not fast enough, Mr. Hamilton. I'm full sure Pottelman never dropped to my spotting him, even if he saw me at all."

"You'd ought to have dropped him, though, Jimmy!" grumbled the other.

"That might not have been so easy, sir. Kit is mighty foxy, and, like a fox, he knows how to show mighty nasty teeth when in a corner. Then, too, Kit knows me of old, and if I should have made a slip-up, he'd jump to the way of it all, too mighty quick!"

"I took stock of all this, sir, and then it didn't take me long to cipher it all out. Either Barry Nash has promised Kitsie more cash for winning the race, than you offered him for selling out, or else the match has leaked out, and an outsider—mayhap Martin Todd—with money enough to make it an object to clinch his bets, has bought the tricky rascal."

"If I really thought so, I'd down him with my own hand!" fiercely exclaimed the sport.

"I told you 'twas a mighty ticklish job, pardner," gloomily cut in Dave Ferguson. "It's got so that after a sprinter wins a good stake or two, all the sports drops to his record, and he's got to leave the path to make a living elsewhere, or he's forced to turn crooked. It can't be any other way, don't you see?"

"Dave is mighty nigh right, Prince," asserted Walker. "The only way you can make sure one of the rascals don't give you the double-winning or losing, directly contrary to your betting—is to lock him up, under double guard, every minute of the time he isn't on the track for his daily exercise. And even then, you want to keep both eyes peeled, or he'll find a chance, while exercising, to sell you out!"

"A man never sells me twice, and if Pottelman tries that on, I'll lay him out, in place of his throwing me down!"

"And serve the cur mighty right, too! But, as I started to say, I have good reason to believe that Kit intends stealing away, to keep in close retirement until the very hour set for the race. Then, if permitted, he'll come out, and—give you the 'double-cross,' by giving Ted as pretty a beating as he ever run up against!"

Prince Hamilton gazed keenly into that shrewd, foxy face, trying to read what might lie back of that cunning mask. Only to fail, with all his boasted powers of penetration, and in tones of sharp irritation, he demanded:

"Well, what have you done to prevent his turning this trick, Jimmy?"

"I?" with arching brows. "Not a thing, sir, so far as I'm concerned; but, I'm open to bet odds that an accident happens to poor Kit, and that before the sun rises in the morning!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

PLANNING FRESH MISCHIEF.

ERE more could be said, another rap sounded at the door, and Miss Ferguson straightened up, a peculiar smile coming into her face as she clasped both hands over her heart, whispering with mock agitation:

"He comes! My King—my idol! Oh, fan me with a shingle!"

At a nod from the Prince, Dave Ferguson left his seat to answer the signal, and first taking a wary peep through that crack, he opened the door, and stepped aside to permit another man to pass him by.

The light revealed a rather short and slender shape, but one whose every motion betrayed both strength and activity. And with a careless nod toward the others, he stepped quickly forward, to drop on one knee in front of Miss Ferguson, doffing his hat and gracefully lifting one of her willing hands to his lips, murmuring:

"At last, my queen! Now I am alive, once more!"

"Then show as much, by acting like a live man, instead of a puppet, Tom Hinton," mocked the woman, withdrawing her hand, and giving him a push with one slipped foot.

Quick as thought he caught that really dainty member, lifting it to meet his bending face. An audible smack! then, with a low, amused laugh, he regained his footing, turning toward the Prince with an off-hand greeting.

"On deck, like a sea-sick pilgrim, Hamilton! You left word for me to drop in, and I've dropped—thus!"

He sunk lazily into a seat vacated by Dave Ferguson, leaning back with legs extended, and hands buried in his trowser pockets.

Evidently Thomas Hinton was a gentleman who preferred taking the world with a spice of ease. And this manner rested fairly well upon him, too, despite his almost effeminate face and figure.

As already stated, the one was short and slender, though perfectly proportioned. The other was free from beard, and the arched upper-lip could boast no more than a goslin-like down; but that was jetty black, and contrasted admirably with his full, red lips, his rosy cheeks, his clear complexion.

There was nothing flashy about his attire, though of fashionable cut and fine material. He wore no jewelry, for Tom Hinton cared for nothing less than the very best, and his salary as bank-clerk was all too slender for one to "cut a splurge" upon.

The Prince gave a short, careless nod in recognition, then his keen eyes sought those of Jimmy Walker. The look told the spy their recent topic was to be dropped for the present, and Walker gave a barely perceptible nod in token of comprehension.

"Mourning over your fall-down, gentlemen?" drawlingly asked Hinton, as he glanced with seeming laziness from face to face of those present. "As for me, I've about concluded to close sluttters and call for a receiver to hunt for lingering assets! In still plainer words, I'm not only all broken up over the race, but I'm broke, as well!"

"If we'd lost nothing worse than you have—" sourly began Dave, bringing another chair near the table, only to be cut short by the gib-tongued clerk.

"There's no comparison whatever, my dear fellow, since I've lost my all, while I'll go bail you've got more than one sock full of extra ducats, waiting an investment! Well, may the next one pay better dividends—that's all!"

"If you've gone broke, there'll be one the less to come in when those dividends are declared, then."

"Oh, I'll be on hand, never you fear, Davie, lad! I'm broke, but I'm one of those fellows who never stay out. And if I can't do any better, I'll just strike my fellow-clerk for a flyer. Maynard, lucky devil! was on the other side of the fence, and came out 'way ahead, if his own talo be credited."

An ugly expression came into the face of Prince Hamilton as this name was mentioned. Possibly it recalled the insolent triumph which Arthur Maynard had exhibited while refusing him the seat he craved, that afternoon.

Be this as it may, Hamilton abruptly changed his mind in one respect, for he spoke to Walker, on the very subject which, only a minute or two earlier, he had placed a mute taboo.

"Speaking about that accident, Jimmy: have you anything better than a blank hope on which to found your offer of odds?"

"If such an accident should happen, sir, you'll not be put out over its coming to pass?"

"So far from that, I'm willing to pay heavily to insure its happening!"

"Then I don't mind admitting that I've set the train to work, sir."

"Good enough, but make it still better, Jimmy. Go see that your train don't miss fire, and when

you bring me the good word, I'll fill your hand full to running over with the do-good!"

Tom Hinton heaved a deep sigh as he listened to this speech, and his black eyes wistfully followed the figure of the decoy as Walker left the room. As the door closed behind him, Thomas sighed afresh, then gave vent to his discontent in soft speech:

"Don't I wish a bit of the same lightning might strike me, though? Can't you contrive it that way, Prince?"

"Jimmy earns all the pay I ever deal his way, Hinton," somewhat harshly retorted the sport, but keenly eying the young man as he added: "Are you dissatisfied with the wages I've been paying you, sir?"

"Not with the wages, Prince," drawled the clerk, facetiously. "Only with the long blanks which lie between pay-days, you understand?"

"Then you are willing to do more work for more pay?"

"Just try me, sir, and see how mighty quick I'll turn busy bee!"

"I'm not so sure that there is any extra work which you can do, though," musingly muttered the chief conspirator, his eyes lowering for the moment, one hand rising to smooth his fine mustache. "You say you haven't been able to discover anything absolutely crooked about young Maynard?"

"Never a crook, Mr. Hamilton," answered Hinton, dropping his whimsical airs now that business seemed to be in order. "He is square as a die, and I'd sorely puzzled if I had to lay finger on a young fellow who carries a cleaner record. And, mind you, I'm saying this of a man whom I hate almost as bad as Satan is said to hate holy water!"

"Not a single weak spot, then?" frowningly asked the Prince.

"I might mention one—terribly weak and tender!" laughingly ventured Miss Ferguson, a jeweled finger tapping her low corsage.

"And I still another," added Hinton, rapping his own curly pate, in much the same humor. "His head is soft enough to be weak, but—worse luck!—I'd lie if I was to call it wicked!"

All of this appeared to be gall and verjuice to Hamilton, but he managed to hold his ugly temper in hand, and repeated his question in another shape:

"Maynard tries to play sport; on his salary, he'd ought to have made some nasty debts. Have you looked into that, Hinton?"

"If he owes money, I fail to find any record of it, sir. I know he is tight-pinched for ready cash, though, of late."

"I'm partially accountable for that state of affairs, I imagine," once more interposed Miss Ferguson. "Thanks to a charming little *tete-a-tete* at poker, last week!"

"Pity you hadn't put him in the hole so deep that he'd try to help himself out by dipping into the bank funds!" growled the Prince, whose evil temper seemed rapidly gaining the upper-hand of his usual nerve.

"Which goes to show you're more familiar with the workings of a faro-bank, than with our sort, Mr. Hamilton," said Hinton, with a fleeting smile. "Maynard hasn't yet risen to the position of casbier. He's simply a clerk, and junior to even myself. He couldn't help himself to even a lead dollar, unless he was to snatch up a package and skip, on the regular bank sneak order."

"Could you do any better, Hinton?"

As Hamilton put that question, slowly, meaningly, a hot flush leaped into Hinton's face, only to pass as swiftly, leaving him pale and, one might almost say, frightened.

It was not the pallor of past guilt, though, and the Prince was keen enough to realize as much. It was caused by the peculiar glitter which he saw in those cold blue eyes, and an intuition of what was coming.

"Take your own time, pardner," added Hamilton, but still maintaining that gaze, as though he wished Hinton to fairly divine his meaning in advance of the words. "Could you steal a package of money—value immaterial to me, just so it was enough to make the bank officials try to hunt down and punish the thief? Could you do this, I ask you?"

"It might possibly—yes, it could be done, but detection would be certain!"

"Not at once, provided the thief was cunning and cool enough to choose his time and opportunity properly!"

"Well, it might be covered up for an hour or so, but discovery of the loss would surely come that same day; at closing accounts, if not before."

"Do you clerks all have to stay indoors until everything is accounted for? You see, Hinton, your head was pretty level when you said I was better versed in faro-bank ethics than with your sort."

Hamilton gave a little laugh as of amusement at his own deficiency, but Tom Hinton was sitting with head bowed, one finger shaping figures on the table between them.

"It sounds pretty tough, Prince," put in Miss Ferguson, with greater gravity than she had as yet displayed, "but I reckon you're right, if it is strictly essential to your plans that Maynard must go down. I've tried my best to hobble

him, but he hasn't forgotten his mother's lessons, entirely. He'll go just so far, then pulls up short, try how I may to lure him a bit further."

"You have tried, then?"

"As I said, I've tried my level best. Maybe I'll be able to pull him across the line, next time, but I've failed up to this."

"Well, if he can resist you, when you really lay yourself out, Mat, he surely must be a modern St. Anthony!" almost brutally declared the now reckless sport.

"Well, you just as certainly have never proved your right to be called Joseph!" tartly retorted the woman, her face flushed with anger, her dark eyes fairly aglow.

Her tones warned Hamilton that he had gone a step too far, if he was not prepared to break entirely with this member of his league. He forced a smile to his face, and even coaxed an injured tone into his voice as he spoke again:

"Oh, come off your high horse, Mattie, darling! Sure, and haven't you been flinging out quips and gibes all the evening? Those who joke, should stand ready to take as to give, surely, girl?"

"Drop it, both of you," growled Ferguson, frowning sternly. "We're here on business, and I've seldom seen less done for the amount of chin-music. So I say it over: drop nonsense, and get down to sober work!"

"Call it square, Mattie, and I'll never offend again in like manner," said Hamilton, receding forth a hand.

It was accepted, then, quick as thought those pearly teeth closed upon its smooth back, giving a bite that broke skin and brought blood.

"Only sealing our compact, Prince," the woman laughed, as Hamilton jerked his hand free, with a sharp oath. "Now I'm done. Go on with your rat-killing, gentlemen all!"

"I'm not promising to turn the trick, you understand, Prince," said Hinton, soberly, as the sport turned in his direction. "Still, it might be done, with care and nerve. Of course you would give me what backing I might stand in need of?"

"In every way except openly showing our hand: yes."

"And you, Miss Mattie?" an almost fierce light leaping into his dark eyes as they bent themselves upon that more comely face. "If I fall into line, regardless of the great risk I may run, will you promise to show me one half as much favor as you have been wasting on that softy, Art Maynard?"

The woman gave a slight start at this abrupt address, and instinctively her eyes turned toward the burly gambler, as though seeking instructions from that quarter.

Dave Ferguson gave a barely perceptible nod, and with a brilliant smile the siren extended a hand toward the now ardent clerk, saying:

"We're all slaves to the Prince, pretty boy, but if you wish to be my own particular—so be it!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CRIPPLED FOOTRACER.

"HELP! Murder! Help!"

Ugly words to meet one's ears, at night, and coming from out the darkness, but particularly so to one whose mind is even then running on the subject of waylaying and assassination.

His first impulse was to shrink back, a hand jerking forth one of the weapons which he had but a moment earlier felt after. Some strange instinct warned him that this was but a cunning trap laid for him by his newly formed enemies: enemies who, so soon, had been foiled in at least two desperate attempts on his very life.

All was darkness in the direction from whence that sudden alarm arose, in strong contrast to the brilliantly lighted street along which he had so recently been strolling; or, if not utter darkness, so near it as to foil even his keen eyes, as the Preacher Sport looked for the person from whose lips that hasty appeal had emanated.

"Don't—oh, boys! Don't—you're killing me!"

Doubt vanished now, and with a cry that was meant to cheer as well as to check, Kent Kasson sprang forward, pistol in hand, ready for use.

No mere decoy could bait his trap so cunningly: he who uttered cry and appeal, felt his very life in mortal peril.

"Steady, there, and throw up your hands!" cried Kasson, sharply, using his free hand to blow a shrill blast on the police whistle which he carried for an emergency.

He caught another cry, this time of sharp pain, and then he was just able to distinguish several phantom-like shapes springing away into the deeper darkness, leaving a single figure behind them. And that one, after a couple of unsteady steps toward that welcome whistle, reeled and sunk to the ground, hoarsely groaning:

"Crippled! Oh, they've done me up—done me up, ba!"

A better spot for ugly work could hardly be elected, and with that grave warning still so fresh in his memory, Kent Kasson showed greater prudence than had marked his actions that day.

"Brace up, pardner," he cried, sharply, keep-

ing in the middle of the street, with all senses on the keen alert. "Help's coming, and we'll pull you through, if it takes a wheel off!"

He sent forth a succession of sharp blasts on his whistle, and a response came from no great distance on Arapahoe street.

"I'm cut—they've done me up, bad!" groaningly cried the man from out the gloom.

"Help is coming; didn't you hear the police answer?"

"They've gone—run away like curs! Crippled—all cut to pieces!"

The last words came in a husky groan, and forgetting the prudence which had held him aloof during those few seconds, Kent Kasson sprang forward, ready to defend himself in case a trap was indeed prepared for him. He could no longer hold out against that fiercely piteous cry.

He could see or hear nothing more suspicious than that prostrate figure, and as he made out that only one man was there, he cast aside all thoughts of this being a snare for his benefit, and was quickly on a knee at the side of the groaning stranger.

"Who did it? Where are you hurt, and how?" he asked, trying to distinguish face and feature by that dim light.

"My leg—slashed wide open!" moaned the sufferer.

Kasson felt in that quarter, and the warm, sticky substance which met his searching fingers, plainly told him the stranger was losing blood. Nothing else could counterfeit that ugly sensation.

Before he could do or ask more, the rapid tread of human feet came echoing along that street, and a fan-shaped light flashed in their direction as a stern voice demanded:

"Hello, there! What's the row, now?"

"This way, officer!" promptly called forth the Preacher Sport. "A man slugged and cut, I'm afraid."

"And who may you be?"

"I heard a call for help, and answered it. I blew a whistle—"

"Steady, the lot of you!" in still sterner tones as the bright light reached that spot and revealed their shapes to him who held the bull's-eye lantern.

"Steady goes, sir, but this poor fellow is bleeding like a stuck hog!" just a little sharply retorted Kasson.

As the officer rapidly advanced, he swept his light from side to side, satisfying himself that he had but those two persons to do battle with in case this should prove a trap of that description. Such things had been, and he himself had but lately risen from a hospital cot, on which he had been stretched through the murderous spite of Denver thugs.

The injured man had ceased his groans, and was partially sitting up, both hands clasping the muscular thigh from which his blood was flowing freely. And as the officer saw that red signal, his over-caution was flung to the winds.

"You have got it, for sure! Did this man cut you?"

"No, he only—They've skipped out, now they've crippled me for keeps! To think of it—The boys—Never race again!"

"Let me tie it up, pardn'r," quickly spoke the Preacher Sport, adding in less gentle tones: "Turn the light fair, officer, please. You can hold your night-club ready, if you think we're putting up a job on you."

"Don't you turn too cranky, my good friend. Knot a bandkerchief around his leg, and I'll send in a call for the patrol wagon," curtly spoke the policeman, leaving his lantern for their use as he hastened away to put his promise into execution.

Kasson followed that hint, and without stopping to examine the extent or depth of the wound, he rudely bandaged the injured member as well as his limited means would admit.

They were not kept long in suspense, but before the officer returned from sending in a call for assistance, the Preacher Sport gleaned one or two facts which he deemed worthy of a mental record.

One was that, while seriously cut and sorely bruised about the head from blows in addition, that wound should have been located just where it had been: in an admirable point for crippling, but where a fatal injury could hardly be given a strong, healthy man.

Shortly after the return of the officer, the patrol wagon came dashing up, prepared with an eye to removing an injured man, and when the crippled stranger was placed in the wagon, Kent Kasson received a quiet hint to the effect that he might as well accompany the officer to the station.

"Merely as a matter of form, sir," a little ironically added the policeman. "You were the only one who witnessed the affair, I believe?"

"What I saw wouldn't make a very long or thrilling record, friend," quietly observed the missionary, as he complied with that hint. "Still, I will go with you. This poor fellow may feel in need of spiritual consolation, and if so—"

"Who is he?" rudely interrupted the officer.

"Beyond the fact that he is a sufferer, fallen

by the wayside, I am wholly unable to tell thee, brother."

The officer gave a snort of disgust, and asked no further questions, yet there is hardly a doubt but that he resolved, more firmly than ever, to keep an eye on this sanctimonious oddity until he had read his title clear.

A police surgeon had accompanied the patrol wagon, but contented himself with taking care that extemporized bandage did not slip, or the lips of the wound did not open during the return drive.

Once at the station-house, the injured man was lifted from the wagon and quickly borne to a cot within the building, where the necessary attention could be given his hurts.

Cuts and bruises marked his head and face, but none of them were of particular importance, and the police surgeon passed them by for the present. When the bloody handkerchief was removed, and the man's right leg laid bare from sock to hip, a far different state of affairs was presented.

The back of his thigh, only a few inches above the knee, was laid open almost to the bone, and as he cautiously parted the lips of that ghastly gash, the surgeon gave utterance to a low growl.

A cry, sharp, full of fierce agony of mind rather than of body, broke from the injured man as he turned his head far enough to note this.

"Crippled—crippled for life! I'll never race—Say I'm not clean crippled, doctor!"

"You surely will be, if you don't let me fall to work, sir," was the non-committal reply.

His lips locked tightly, the poor fellow closed his eyes and made no sound while the wound was being cleansed and stitched, together. He maintained the same dogged silence during the bandaging process, but when the surgeon straightened up, with a breath of relief after his work, he spoke with forced calmness:

"It's not so bad as it looks, sir? I'll be all right in a few days, or weeks at the outside—eh?"

"So far as getting about is concerned, yes, Pottleman."

"You know me, then?" with a slight shrinking away.

"To my sorrow, old fellow," breaking the harshness of his words by giving a slight laugh. "I put my money up against your heels, Kit, and lost, of course."

"I didn't know—I will get over it, then?"

"Your life is in no danger, sir, but your racing days are over," the surgeon said, with a gravity which could not be misunderstood.

For a single breath there was silence, the injured man seemingly stunned by those grave words: words which meant so much to a man of his profession. Then he broke forth in a storm of curses, of threats, of almost pitiful plaints.

He was asked to give some clew to those who had so cruelly misused him, but the poor fellow seemed unable to understand what was wanted, or anything save that, to him, terrible verdict.

"Crippled—no good—ruined for life! Why didn't they kill me outright? What have I to live for now?" he moaned, huskily.

"To play even, for one thing, Pottleman," said the surgeon, in response to a hint given by the policeman. "Who were you with when cut? Give us their names if you know them, their descriptions if you can't do better."

"I don't—I just fell in their way, and never saw enough to tell—curse them, one and all! They were hired to do me up, so I couldn't throw—"

His teeth clicked sharply together, so suddenly did he check his wild speech. Then, in weak, husky tones he added:

"They were strangers to me, and 'twas all dark. I can't tell much about them, but I'll try, if—send word to Barry Nash that I want to see him—quick!"

CHAPTER XX.

UGLY SUSPICIONS CONFIRMED.

With steadily growing interest Kent Kasson had watched and listened through all this, but at mention of that name, he stepped forward, with a suddenly taken resolution.

"Do you mean the son of the late lamented Norman Nash, brother?"

"Yes," answered the surgeon. "There's only one Barry Nash in Denver: the city isn't large enough, as yet, to accommodate two!"

"I had an appointment with the young gentleman, and was on my way to keep it when checked by your cry for help, poor fellow," the missionary asserted, in compassionate tones. Shall I go ask his coming?"

"Tell him I must see him! Tell him Kit Pottleman wants him, quick as he can get to me!"

"Better have him come to the hospital, Kit," said the surgeon, restraining the volunteer messenger by a sign. "You'll be more comfortable there, than here, or at a private lodging-place."

"No, I can't go there!" shivered the poor wretch, with the curious aversion which so many unfortunate of his class regard a hospital. "Tell Nash to come! He'll help me—

he's got to help me out o' this! Send for him, please?"

"One moment," interposed the officer who had been first to answer that call for assistance. "Look at this gentleman, Kit: he was not one of the gang that downed you?"

"No. I never saw him before—he helped save my life, man! Let him go—you will go fetch Barry Nash, friend?"

"If I find him at home, certainly," responded Kasson, then hastily leaving the station.

The Preacher Sport certainly intended keeping that pledge, but it had been given with a mental proviso, born of what he had already learned, and much more which he strongly suspected.

"He's in no danger, and a few minutes longer of waiting can't harm him," were some of the reflections which flashed through his busy brain as he hastened toward the quarter of the city in which the hotel named on the card given him by Martin Todd was located. "Now that his friend—or is it patron?—has been sent for, he'll calm down, and be all the better for a bit of waiting."

Kent Kasson might have retired from the sporting arena, as he had so frequently intimated that eventful day, but in those betting days he had learned sundry points concerning sprinters in general, and Kit Pottleman, the "Kansas Phenomenon" as his advent into foot-racing circles had been loudly heralded, in particular.

"Is this another blow aimed against Nash? Is there a match on the tapis, and was Kit crippled to injure the reckless young plunger, even more than Pottleman himself? He let drop a hint as to those rascals being hired to 'do him up,' and if he'd only tell the whole story—if he's got to out with it!"

Although far from certain that he would be so fortunate as to find his recently formed friend, Martin Todd, at his hotel so early in the evening, particularly on the eve of such a glorious victory, Kent Kasson made all haste to that building, and a low, glad ejaculation broke through his lips as he caught sight of a portly figure just about entering the hotel.

By that brilliant light there could be no mistake; it was Martin Todd, and with a word which went in advance, Kasson checked the sport as his foot was lifted to touch the marble step.

"Hello, pardner!" cordially greeted the missionary, and a broad smile lit up that honest, fun-loving face as its owner added: "Just in time to help me tie a night-cap, Brother Kasson! They keep an unusually prime article on tap here; and I know you dearly love your pop!"

"Never mind that jest for the present, pardner," almost brusquely responded the Preacher Sport, lowering his tones as he came up, to add: "I want to speak seriously with you, Mr. Todd. Will you take a bit of a walk with me, out of ear-shot?" flashing a meaning glance toward the strangers who were standing near the wide entrance.

"What's the matter with going to my room? We could have a bottle, and a good cigar, then—"

"I'd prefer a turn down this way," interposed Kasson, slipping a hand through an arm, and moving down the street. "You'll not feel sorry for yielding a bit, pardner, unless I'm 'way off in my guesses!"

"That you ask it is plenty good enough for me, Kasson," came the quick, earnest response. "You've fallen into trouble, then?"

"No, but another party has. Did you ever hear tell of a foot-racer called Kit Pottleman?"

"Who hasn't? The fastest man at a hundred I know of, but—tricky as a mule! He'd 'throw down' his own father, if he knew he could make an extra dollar by giving him the cross!"

"Well, I'm thinking he's played his last trick of that sort, for—"

"What?" jerking his arm free, the better to stare into that grave visage. "You surely don't mean—What do you mean, anyhow?"

"That Pottleman has been crippled by a gang this evening, and if he ever races again, 'twill be a miracle of surgical skill."

"You don't—you surely can't mean it, man!"

"I've just come from the station where I helped take him. I've seen the gash across his leg; only a razor could have done it. And if you ask still plainer proof that my news is authentic, I promised the poor fellow to carry his message to Barry Nash; and that was, for him to hasten without loss of time to one Kit Pottleman."

Through this clearly delivered explanation, Martin Todd stood staring into the face of the speaker, but as Kasson ceased speaking, a deep, almost savage oath broke from the portly sport.

"By the holies! I knew it, but—A gang, you say?"

"So Pottleman said, rather. I caught but a fleeting glimpse of two or three fellows running away, and the place was too dark for me to make any one of them out."

"It don't need! I can clap my hand on the very rascals—or, if not the actual tools, on those who put up the dirty job!"

"You mean?"

"That it's another blow at Barry Nash, by

Prince Hamilton's gang, no less," moodily declared Todd, his voice lowering to a more guarded pitch, but lacking nothing of his first fierceness.

"The same idea struck me, when the poor fellow let drop a half-hint as to his having an important race on hand," quietly said the Preacher Sport, once more locking arms and moving slowly along, as the surest method of arousing no unwelcome curiosity among the passers-by. "Do you know anything about this match race, Brother Todd?"

His quiet tones produced the effect intended, and Martin Todd suppressed his strong excitement in a degree.

"Nothing positive, but I've heard enough to make me sure, after this, that such a race is on, and that Barry Nash is mixed up in it."

"And if that is the case, it's not hard to place the other side, of course. I had a shrewd suspicion that something of the sort was astir, and for that reason I volunteered to carry Pottleman's message to Mr. Nash. Instead, I came to you."

"I wish I could—what is it you expect me to do, pardner?"

"Well, if such a match is on, and I think we may take it for granted we are right to that extent—"

"There is a match, and Nash is in it. I know that much, through my private agent. I didn't know he was backing Pottleman, though! If I had, I'd never rested until I'd talked or cursed some sense into the headstrong young rascal!"

Martin Todd was strongly excited, and when in that condition, he was hardly one to pick and choose his words.

"Did your agent tell you who was backing the other side?"

"No, but it don't take a prophet to name the gang!"

"Well, let that pass for the present. What I wanted of you, is just this: Go with me to the station, and say that Nash can't be found just now, but that, as his friend, you'll see Pottleman cared for. That you will take him to your hotel, and assume all charges. And knowing you as a thoroughly responsible citizen, they'll be only too glad to shunt all further trouble off on your shoulders."

"All right, if you say it must be so," assented Todd. "But that isn't all you're playing for, pardner?"

"Hardly," with a fleeting smile. "You'll get the whole story out of Pottleman, while his gratitude is hot, and if he has been 'downed' by the gang we suspect, and for the reason we believe, we'll know better how to take the next step."

"Ha! you mean to keep the gang in the dark, then?"

"Just that, and Barry Nash as well. But I'll explain more fully after we learn the exact condition of affairs. Just now, let's go have Pottleman removed to safer quarters."

This was quite readily accomplished, thanks to the standing which the bachelor sport held in Denver. The injured man, in his intense aversion to becoming a hospital patient, smothered his impatience to see Barry Nash, and raised no objections to the transfer.

This was effected with as slight demonstration as possible, and as fortune seemed to favor the friendly schemers, very few persons took note of their actions.

When Pottleman was comfortably installed in Todd's own chamber, and had calmed down a bit after the excitement attendant upon the removal, Kent Kasson gave Todd a covert signal to begin the pumping process.

The veteran sport fell to work with considerable subtlety, and after again explaining the cause of their failing to find Barry Nash, he gently touched upon the matter of the projected foot-race, speaking like one who had been fully trusted with the secret by young Nash.

Despite all this precaution on his part, Martin Todd did not at once gain the full confidence of the cripple. Long experience in "ways that are dark," if not in "tricks that are vain," rendered Pottleman suspicious of every person.

He would neither admit nor deny that he was engaged for a race, at first, but Todd had ample patience, and apparently no end of tact.

His brain had been busy enough, and what he had not already gleaned through his secret agent, he had pretty well reasoned out for himself.

"I told Nash he was an idiot for making a match on such terms," he bluntly asserted, after a while. "All play-or-pay matches are an abomination, but when it comes to sprinting—well, you know how it is yourself, Pottleman! If this hadn't been of that sort, the other side wouldn't have had such a fine excuse for doing you up!"

"I'll get even with them, if I live long enough!" viciously muttered the crippled sprinter. "They done it—who else would?"

"Of course they did it, old fellow. They've done just as nasty work before. But what can't be cured, must be endured, I reckon. Still, if I was you, I'd make it mighty hot for the Prince."

"The Prince?" echoed Pottleman, falling into the trap. "Dave Ferguson is backing Coulton!"

"Of course. Dave Ferguson, alias Prince Hamilton!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPRINTER'S CONFESSION.

THERE was something in the tones of Martin Todd as he made this amendment, that served to stir afresh the suspicions which had become second nature to the foot-racer.

Forced to play double themselves, if only in order to "make a living," your professional pedestrian can hardly escape becoming a confirmed pessimist so long as he sticks to the cinder-path, and Kit Pottleman was not an exception to the general rule.

"I don't know nothin' about no Prince," he muttered, with suddenly acquired doggedness. "I don't want to talk: I want to see my man!"

"So you shall see him, old man, but while you're waiting for his coming, why not make a clean breast of the whole job?"

It was a rather risky venture, but the veteran sport believed he was justified in making it, from his prior knowledge of that man.

"I don't—you're trying to scare me into making a fool of myself!" uneasily muttered the sprinter.

"Just the contrary, Kit; I'm trying to keep you from being an idiot, worse than you've already proved yourself. Do you really think you could arrange and carry out a 'double' on Barry Nash?"

"Who says I—Who are you, man?"

"One who promises to not only stand by you in this, your severe trial, brother, but who likewise offers you a fair chance to punish the dastardly enemies who have so cruelly misused you," interposed the Preacher Sport, fearful lest blunt Martin Todd should frighten the fellow beyond all hope of making a confession.

The injured man stared keenly at the last speaker for a brief space, then a light of recognition sprung into his eyes.

"I know you, now! You drove Silver King, to-day."

"Yes, I saw you at the Park, Kit, although you went in disguise," said Todd, easily. "This gentleman did drive Silver King, and that fact ought to convince you that he's a sound friend to Barry Nash. And that the same gang that downed you, can have precious little love for him, after that dump on The Dodger. Isn't that plain enough, my lad?"

There was a brief silence, during which the suspicious creature glanced from face to face. There was something in all this which he could not readily comprehend, and that fact alone was quite sufficient to make him shy.

Acting on a hint given by the injured man himself, Kent Kasson once more put in his oar, quietly saying:

"You're not a fool, Pottleman. You've lived long enough, and had worldly experience enough to know that ordinary men don't go to so much trouble and expense, simply because they find a fellow-being in need. Now—would you rather be turned over to the charity ward of the hospital, or—"

"Don't—I can't go there! They'd help me croak, then cut—I can't go there, I tell you, man!"

"Nor shall you, Pottleman, provided you make a clean breast of this little scheme. I pledge you that much, by the word and the sign!"

Taking the sufferer's right hand within his own, Kent Kasson bent low enough for lip to brush ear, whispering the mystic word which proclaimed the twain as brothers.

Martin Todd looked curiously on, but did not interfere. He had taken notice of the secret order badge worn by the sprinter, but this was his first intimation that the Preacher Sport also was a member. He himself stood without, for he had never "taken stock" in such matters.

He was given a practical exemplification, however. From that moment of time, Kit Pottleman placed implicit faith in the odd-looking stranger who had now become as a brother.

"Considerately in Mr. Todd, brother," quietly said Kasson, making way when that understanding was fully reached. "He is not seeking information through idle curiosity, but with the intention of punishing the evil ones who have already wrought great injury, to you, as to others. Trust him, even as you would trust in me, brother."

"What is it you want to know?" quietly asked the racer, regarding the veteran sport with an entirely changed expression.

"Well, what's the matter with telling the whole story, pardner?" innocently queried the bachelor sport, in turn. "That will save both time and breath, since there needn't come any breaks through asking questions on our side."

Kit Pottleman looked toward the Preacher Sport, who silently bowed.

"You mean all about the match, of course?"

"Yes. We already know part, but we're after the whole thing."

"Well, that's easily told. I'd heard of Barry Nash before I struck town, and of course he had heard of me. He made sure he could depend on my running for him, if a match offered, and when Dave Ferguson gave him a bluff on Coulton, why—"

"Wait a bit, Kit. Did Ted come here with you?"

"You're off, pardner," quickly cried the sprinter.

er. 'Twas a fair, square match, so far. I didn't know Coulton was in these parts, nor did he even suspect who Nash was going to back against him. I say this, on my oath—you believe me, sir?" with a glance toward Kasson.

"Yes, brother. You can depend on his telling you the simple truth, Mr. Todd, under the pledge we have exchanged."

"All right. Ask pardon, Kit. Go on, please."

"Well, Ferguson bantered Nash, and the end was a match race at one hundred yards, play or pay, for five thousand a side. Big figures, you'll think, but I've had more than that staked on my heels, remember!"

"I know. Go on with your story."

Ferguson gave the name of his man; he couldn't very well help that, for Ted had been going about in the open, never once thinking there was a show for a match. You see, we sprinters keep in touch mighty close, sir, and Coulton believed I was 'way out in California."

"I know. I was fooled by the same newspaper report."

"I took advantage of the yarn, of course, though that was all the connection I had with it, sir. I gave Nash the hint, and that's why he made the match as he did; Nash's Unknown against Coulton. But it's mighty hard to keep the eyes of a professional ped filled with dust, and Ted dropped to the Unknown, and the first I knew, the gang at his back were after me to throw the race their way!"

"To which you consented, of course, Kit?"

Pottelman shrunk from that sharp tone and stern gaze, but as his eyes sought relief from the newly found brother, Kasson said:

"Have faith, brother! Tell the truth and shame the adversary!"

"What else could I do, then?" was the sprinter's sullen admission. "They offered me one half our stake to throw the race. I'd get only a hundred or so for winning it. I had to live. And so—I took up with their offer!"

"A queer set you foot racers, truly!"

"Don't I know that? Haven't I cursed the luck that gave me a fast pair of legs? And yet, when I began running, I was honest as the day! I cared more for winning than I did for the money that was at stake. I swore that I'd rather die a beggar than be guilty of throwing a race for pay, but—I'm like all the rest!"

"Why man, if an angel from heaven was to come down to the path, he couldn't stay on it six months before he'd turn crooked! No ped can turn professional and stick to the cinders without going to the bad, unless he wants to starve. He must run for the money there's in it, and the biggest boodle is ever on the crooked side!"

With almost savage intensity came this assertion, every word of which was true; the records show it, and professionals themselves will be the very last to deny the charge.

"I've heard something of the like, Kit. Two different ped's have admitted as much to me. Still, since they'd bought you over to throw the race their way, why should they cripple you like this?"

"That shows how true my words are, man! Why should they cripple me? you ask. Simply to make sure I didn't give them the 'double cross,' of course! Since the match was play or pay, if they could keep me from coming to the mark, they'd be dead-sure of the main stakes. True, if I did come to the scratch, and had kept good faith with them, they might win even more through backing their own man; but—well, the title 'sprinter' is pretty much the same thing as thief, and they concluded not to run long chances, I reckon."

The foot-racer's head drooped as he uttered those words, and he apparently had nothing further to confess.

Martin Todd was about to renew his questions, however, when a gesture from Kent Kasson checked him.

"Wait a bit, Brother Tod," he said, in slow, thoughtful tones, which grew even more deliberate as he continued:

"Let me mark off the different points, please. You can correct me if you think I'm making any material mistake."

"First, Barry Nash backs an Unknown, to race against Ted Coulton, for five thousand dollars a side, play or pay: in other words, if Barry Nash fails to produce his Unknown within the hour named for the race, he is to forfeit the entire stake to the backers of Ted Coulton. Am I right in my statement, brother?"

"That's just the way the thing stands, sir," gloomily assented Kit.

"Well, one thing farther: since Nash was backing an Unknown, of course there was no other name or title, and no personal description inserted in the articles of agreement?"

"No. Just Nash's Unknown; but—"

"What difference can that make?" harshly interposed Todd, scowling darkly. "There's not over three men in the entire country who can beat Ted Coulton at a level hundred, in an honest race. Kit is one of those three, and he—Well, look at him!"

"Crippled—a live dog, who'd better be a dead one!" groaned the sprinter, burying his face in his pillow, ashamed of the hot tears which came from his eyes at the bitter reflection.

"Hope for the best, brother," soothingly mur-

mured Kasson, then adding, in clear but quiet tones:

"As for the match, I know a fellow who can win for Barry Nash."

Pottelman lifted his head with a jerk. Martin Todd started from his chair in his excitement, spluttering swiftly:

"You don't—you know—who is it, man alive?"

An amused smile crept into that enigmatical visage, and Kasson appeared highly gratified by the sensation that calm speech had awakened. But instead of instantly replying, he cast his eyes downward, as though consulting an oracle which dwelt in his battered tile.

"You don't mean it, man? If you do—who is your man, then?" impatiently demanded Todd, almost fiercely.

"An Unknown, of course, since that's the way the articles of agreement read," came the cool, deliberate, not to say provoking response. "I know my man can win over Ted Coulton, if he cares to do so. The only question is, can I find him in time?"

"Then you don't know where he is?" asked Todd, disappointedly.

"Not exactly; but I caught sight of him at the Park to-day."

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

It was at a rather late hour when Barry Nash sat down at a table in "Morton's" for his breakfast, the day following the great race at the Driving Park.

Although he still maintained the residence left himself and his sister, Ilda, by their father, at his death, Barry Nash was very irregular in his attendance at the home table. Considerably more than half of his meals were taken downtown, and he only too frequently passed the night there, as well.

On this particular forenoon, however, the young plunger was looking unusually fresh and rosy. Possibly his heavy winnings of the day last past accounted for this, for such winnings had been alarmingly few and far apart during the last year or so.

Be this as it may, the young fellow never looked better or handsomer in his life, than just now, when Prince Hamilton crossed the threshold, to give vent to an exclamation of relief as he caught sight of the prime object of his quest, almost the sole occupant of that quiet retreat.

Barry Nash turned his head as that ejaculation reached his ear, and a broad smile came into his face as he recognized his false friend.

"Hello, Prince! Come to join me in a feed?"

"Well, hardly," was the sport's reply, as he came forward, to drop into a chair at the opposite side of the little table. "I've got away with my grub, long since, but I'm hardly ready to tackle dinner. You're looking bright and chipper as a school-boy on a holiday, man!"

"Why not? The King is just as bright, and I'm in funds once more. Why wouldn't I seem chipper?"

"Then you haven't looked over the papers, as yet?"

"No. Why should I? To read the account of the races? I saw them, which is enough sight more interesting. Do let me call Henry, and have him take your order, pardner?"

"I've no appetite, and I'm sadly afraid you'll have still less when you see this paragraph," a little testily retorted Hamilton, producing a copy of the *Republican*, one white finger pointing out the article alluded to.

Barry Nash took the paper in one hand, and while sipping his coffee with the aid of the other, he leisurely glanced over the lines which seemingly had so strongly excited the usually cool sport.

The article in question was a brief one, probably because it had been near the hour for going to press when the "enterprising reporter" first struck the incident, or its scent. Still, the matter was deemed of sufficient interest to deserve a "scare head," which Barry Nash pronounced as it struck his notice:

"His last race, eh? Well, that surely doesn't mean the King, for he's good for a dozen others, each one better than the last!"

"Read the rest, man!" impatiently urged the Prince. "You'll find it hits you hard—mighty hard, or I miss my guess!"

A dark frown crept over his brows as he closely watched his seemingly unsuspecting friend, for never was there a more careless fellow, to all outward seeming, than was Barry Nash just then.

He even broke off in the middle of the paragraph, to cut a bit of steak, which he seemed to find a vast deal more interesting to his palate than those words were to his eyes.

"Well, that's mighty rough on Pottelman!" he declared, as the item was concluded. "Unless all accounts lie, he was about at the top-notch as a sprinter, though I never was lucky enough to see him in a race."

"Rough on Pottelman!" echoed Hamilton, his impatience mingling with growing suspicion. "I'd rather say 'twas mighty rough on Barry Nash!"

The young plunger lifted both eyes and brows, checking another choice bit of porter-house midway to his lips.

"Rough on—oh, come off, Prince! What have I got to do with it? You surely don't fancy I had a finger in the pie, do you?"

"Isn't Pottelman your Unknown?" bluntly demanded Hamilton, casting diplomacy to the winds, in his impatience to get at the bottom of that wholly unexpected coolness.

That choice bit went the way of all beef-steak, when broiled, and as his willing teeth closed upon it, Barry Nash gave a leisurely wink, which was still further emphasized by his shrewd smile.

"Did Dave Ferguson send you to ask that question, Prince?"

"Of course he didn't. What makes you ask such a foolish question, man?" sharply rejoined the schemer, with difficulty keeping his face from giving the lie to his assertion.

"Well, partly for information, but mainly because the idea struck me what a neat little answer I might send David, in turn."

"What answer would that be, then?"

"Just to tell him you didn't know, of course. Still, since David never sent you to find out, that drops to the ground. Pity, isn't it? For, sometimes, I almost fancy Ferguson really needs a good taking down from the high horse. What is your opinion, old fellow?"

Hamilton forced a little laugh. He had fully counted on finding Nash deeply "in the doleful dumps," and hoped to surprise him into admitting the whole thing. Finding him so different, he began to doubt the entire truth of that report. And yet—had he not confirmed it all, himself?

Foiled in his first attack, he promptly altered his manner, though without radically changing the main point. Forcing a smile, which he purposely gave an air of dubiety, he spoke again:

"Well, if I've jumped to the wrong conclusion, Nash, I'm not so mighty much to blame, after all."

"Meaning just which, gentle sovereign?"

"Of course I was posted as to the match, so far as that a match was on. You seemed bent on making a bit of mystery concerning your man, and for that reason I never asked you any open questions."

"Although you let fall a precious lot of hints, old friend," retorted Nash, with a cool smile.

"Was there any harm in that, when I stood ready to back your judgment with my money, old fellow?"

"Not to say harm, but there might be risk. Don't get huffy, Prince, for I'm not slurring you in the least. What I meant was, the fewer in a secret of this sort, the less liable that secret is to leak out. If Pottelman had really been my Unknown—what made you think that way, Hamilton?"

"I didn't, until I read that account of his mishap. But I knew who Ferguson was backing, and I knew that Pottelman was one of the very few racers who could hold Ted level at a hundred. And so, fearing another streak of hard luck might be coming your way, I hurried around to the station named, and asked all about the affair."

"Did you learn anything more than is printed here, Prince?"

"Yes. The sergeant in charge told me Pottelman was surely crippled for life, and that as soon as the surgeon notified him to that effect, he broke clean down, and begged that word might be sent to Barry Nash, who was in duty bound to see him through."

"Is that so? Why didn't they send me word, then?"

"They did send. An old fellow—from the description given me I feel sure 'twas the same queer cuss who drove the King yesterday—went for you at once."

"I haven't seen that fellow since I lost sight of him at the Park," quickly declared the young sport.

"Well, Pottelman was taken away from the station, by Kasson, as he calls himself, and Martin Todd. I supposed of course that you gave them authority to use your name: for use it they surely did!"

The smile, real or forced, faded from Nash's face at this assertion, and there was a change in his tones as well.

"You'd make a pretty fair detective, Prince, if sporting didn't pay you better wages. Now—mind you, old fellow, I'm not admitting that this Kit Pottelman is the Unknown I had in view when I made that match with Dave Ferguson. But, supposing he was my man, what sort of show would Dave give me for my stake?"

Prince Hamilton hesitated before replying. He had hardly looked for a turn like this, and his wits seemed less active than usual, of late.

"You didn't drop in on them, then, last night?"

"No. I had other matters to attend to: Silver King, among them. I wouldn't leave him until fully satisfied that no harm had come to him in that race. You saw them, though, I imagine?"

"Not after leaving the Park, but Dave was hit terribly hard, don't you know? When Fitch fizzled, he thought he had a lead-pipe cinch, and took every bet he could find, without stopping,

to ask the odds. And so, naturally, he's a bit rusty over it. Still, I'll go with you if you want to ask him about it."

"Well, suppose we do drop in on him for a bit?" rising from his seat. "Mind you, though, I'm not admitting that Pottleman was, or is, my Unknown."

"I heartily hope he isn't, but—if not, why bother to call on friend Ferguson?"

"Oh, just to feel his pulse," said Nash, with a short, dry laugh as they left the restaurant, arm-in-arm together. "David poses as a big-hearted sport, full of love for his fellow-plungers, but, do you know, I've sometimes fancied he loved them just as a hungry spider loves a nice, fat fly!"

This was an unusual mood for the careless, reckless, genial young fellow, but Prince Hamilton was secretly delighted with the change. It told him the shoe was beginning to pinch, and that his heavy winnings of the past day failed to enhearten the man whom he, for his own base ends, had sworn to ruin, body and soul!

But few words passed between the pair while proceeding to the saloon kept by Dave Ferguson, in connection with his gambling establishment. Both had ample food for thought, and neither were men likely to air their secrets in the public streets.

Ferguson himself was in attendance at the richly-fitted bar, and gave them a cordial greeting as they entered, setting forth glasses and a decanter without waiting for an order.

"Join us, David," said Hamilton, quietly. "We've come to ask a favor of you, and a bit of this distilled sunshine may put you in a better humor for granting it."

"Here's with you, gentlemen, of course, but it don't need a treat to win a favor from yours at command. Now—what can I do for you?"

"Go where we can talk in privacy, first thing. Your rooms will do."

Without a word of objection, Ferguson turned the bar over to his assistant, and led the way to the room where that consultation took place the evening before, then looked expectantly toward Barry Nash.

"How much will you take to call our footrace off, Ferguson?" the young sport asked, without wasting time in beating about the bush.

"Just five thousand dollars, no more, no less, Mr. Nash!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

'A VERY PRETTY BLUFF.'

If Nash had discarded all ceremony, Ferguson certainly did not seem inclined to object. Direct as was the question, the reply was even more blunt.

Although so evenly, almost quietly uttered, they were the words of one who expects an outburst of angry remonstrance, and one as well who has resolved to show no mercy in that case.

Prince Hamilton seemed painfully shocked by that blunt rebuff, and without giving Barry Nash a fair chance to rally, he exclaimed:

"But, Ferguson, you can't mean it, man!"

"Why not?"

"In other words, you want the entire porker, David?" asked Nash, with a fleeting smile. "The match is only made for a fiver, remember."

"I've got it booked, Mr. Nash, never fear. Betting is my business, not a pastime, you understand. I go at it in a business manner. You young bloods can afford to trust to luck and a good memory, perhaps, but when my money goes up, the record goes down, in plain black and white."

"No one's objecting to that, old fellow, but when you catch a man in a black streak of luck—"

"Just as Silver King caught me, yesterday, do you mean, Prince?"

"That hardly sounds like you, old man," repreachfully said Hamilton, seemingly annoyed by that dogged tone and look. "If you lost the cash, you put up on The Dodger, you had a race for your money, didn't you?"

"Such as it was, yes. So can Nash have, can't he?"

"You've read the morning papers, haven't you, Dave?"

"I've looked over them, yes."

"Then you surely know why we're here now, asking a show for our money. You know the match can't come off now, because it's too late to even think of picking up another man to put in Pottleman's place."

"What has he got to do with it?" asked Ferguson, in affected surprise. "Nash never said—was Kit your Unknown, Barry?"

"I never said so, did I?" lazily drawled the young sport, who had remained silent through that interchange of words, seemingly well content to let the Prince play spokesman.

"But he is, of course, and you know it, Dave. Now, once more: what will you take to call the match off?" urged Hamilton, in his eagerness fairly crowding the other principal out of the talk once more.

Nothing could have been more admirably played, so far as the Prince was concerned, and Ferguson was coming in a close second.

"Just what I said I'd take at the send-off, gentlemen," coldly repeated the red-bearded gambler. "You've known me long enough, Prince,

to know that I hold there's no friendship in business, and least of all in gambling. If a sport comes to me, and says he's down on his luck, I'll lend or give him double what he asks; but when it comes down to bets, they must go or come according to rule."

"Of course, Dave, if you stick to the letter of the code, you've got a perfect right to take everything that code allows; still, in a case like this—between good friends, too—I must say that it looks infernally like highway robbery!"

Plain words from one "gentleman" to another, and a hot flush rose to the temples of the red-bearded gambler. Prince Hamilton might be thoroughly sincere in his wish to lend a friend in trouble a helping hand, but this looked very much as though he was pushing him still deeper into the mire.

"That's your way of looking at it, gentlemen, no doubt, but that's because you're on the wrong side of the wire. Now—just one more word, if you please," his voice seeming to harden as he continued: "If my man had been the one to meet with an accident so he couldn't help me out with the match, I'd expect to pay, just as you'd look to me for the cash. And so—play or pay, Mr. Nash!"

"Am I kicking, Ferguson?" coldly demanded the younger sport.

"Prince Hamilton is kicking for you, isn't he?"

"Not through my asking. Did I set you forward as my representative in this little affair, Prince?"

Hamilton was clearly taken aback by that cool, almost cold query. Barry Nash had acted oddly from start to finish, in fact, and the keen-witted schemer had utterly failed to satisfy himself as to why that change had come, and just what it all meant.

Thus bluntly cornered, he could only give a denial, with the addition:

"Of course I knew it must be your man, and so—well, as a friend, I tried to get Ferguson to listen to something like reason."

Barry Nash listened with a faint smile creeping into his face, and there was a touch of sneering in his tones as he spoke again:

"You're a friend worth having, Hamilton, and I'm your debtor so far, even if you couldn't win David over to your point of view."

"Business is business, gentlemen," doggedly muttered Ferguson.

"I'm glad you think so, David," that smile deepening the while. "I admit that I came here on business, though hardly of the sort fancied by the Prince. Instead of coming to beg off, I'm here to pile on, if you feel in the humor, Ferguson."

Hamilton gave an exclamation of genuine surprise, and the red-bearded gambler stared halfbewilderedly at that bright, genial face.

"Hamilton took it for granted that Pottleman was my man. I certainly never let drop a word that could confirm him in any such belief. Did I, Hamilton?"

"You tried to deny it, but—isn't he your Unknown?"

"Now you're making the same sort of mistake, old fellow," said Nash, with a little chuckle. "You're going too fast, and taking entirely too much for granted. What's got into you this morning, anyway?"

"What's come over you, I'd rather know?" almost savagely growled the irritated schemer.

"Well, after pulling off a neat little boodle as I did yesterday, thanks to the Silver King, haven't I the right to feel my oats a bit? And so, as I hinted, I'm here to pile on, instead of begging off, David!"

"But—Pottleman is crippled, and you can't—"

"Will you button up, Prince? I've not even admitted that I feel the slightest interest in this mishap which has befallen poor Kit; in a betting way, you understand, gentlemen. Of course I sympathize with the poor fellow, and hope he'll pull through in safety, to win many another close race. Beyond that, I've not another word to say."

"Then he isn't your Unknown?" persisted Hamilton, losing much of his usual shrewdness in meeting with such an unexpected bluff.

"Come to the track when the hour rolls 'round, Prince, and you may be able to answer that question for yourself. Ask for me; I put my money on an Unknown, and an Unknown 'twill be, up to the very hour of the race. Is that plain enough language, gentlemen?"

"But—why didn't you call the Prince off, then, when he was making a monkey of us both?" harshly asked Ferguson.

"Why should I interfere? Hamilton seemed enjoying himself, and if it was a bitter pill to your palate, David, then you'd ought to sue that face of yours for libel!"

"You come here, then, just to play a joke?"

The tone and manner of the younger sport abruptly changed at that harsh demand, and Barry Nash gave a sample of the manhood which really belonged to his careless, reckless nature.

"Wrong again, Dave Ferguson; I came in sober earnest, not in jesting humor. I've simply been letting you both have free range, because I'd made up my mind to get the bottom facts; to find out, at first hand, what show a poor

devil would have who was unlucky enough to fall wholly into your grip. I think I've found out, too!"

The burly gambler flashed a scowling glance from face to face, then brought his eyes back to Barry Nash, asking in a surly growl:

"Is that meant for a slur on me, sir?"

"Not unless you really prefer to take it that way, Ferguson. It is the truth, though, and I know now, what I've fancied more than once of late days, that a man might better blow his brains out at once, than to fall cleanly into your power."

"Don't—touch lightly, gentlemen, I beg of you!" hastily interposed Hamilton, for it was no part of his plans to have an open rupture come between them. "I see how I was to blame, for taking too much for granted, and so—Be friends, if only for my sake, gentlemen!"

"Well, if Nash really didn't mean to insult me, all right," sulkiy growled the gambler, though it was a bitter pill to swallow.

"And you, Nash?" turning toward the young plunger. "After all, Dave simply stood up for his rights, although I still think he might have come to more reasonable terms, seeing you've done so much business together. You'll forget it all, please?"

"Why not?" with a frank little laugh. "I didn't come here to mix in a fight, of course. I'd always rather bet than scrap, particularly with a goodly wad in my pockets, as right now."

At a nod from Hamilton, Ferguson extended a hand, which Nash shook, then let it drop, to crisply add:

"Now let's come to solid business, please. I told the Prince I had not even glanced at the paper reports this morning, and that was the simple truth. Still, I heard about the cutting scrape, last night, and I've seen Kit Pottleman. He told me in just so many words that he had been bought up by the backers of Ted Coulton!"

"That's an infernal lie!" fiercely exclaimed Ferguson.

"It's none of my hatching, or somebody would get licked for that word, Mr. Ferguson. I'm simply telling you what Pottleman swore was the solid truth. He said the backers of Ted Coulton found him out, and offered him one-half the main stake, if he'd throw the race their way. He said that he agreed to take their offer, and that he was in good faith in doing so."

"He lied, all the same. I never even knew he was in town."

"If he really had such an offer, and accepted it, why was he crippled, then?" asked Hamilton, sharply.

"For fear he'd sell those who bought him, and run the race out when the pistol was fired, of course."

"I tell you, Barry Nash, he lied when he gave you that stiff!" Dave Ferguson declared, adding with a fine assumption of injured dignity: "I defy any such trickster to blacken my record, gentlemen. I'm willing to face this liar in any court of the land, if—"

"I'm hardly the sort of sport who takes his wagers into court, Mr. Ferguson," coldly interposed Nash. "I back my judgment, and take my gains or losses accordingly. As for this ugly affair—"

"One moment, in my turn, Nash," interrupted Ferguson. "I'll offer to draw stakes now, but to do so in the face of such ugly charges as Kit Pottleman makes, would cast suspicion on me, as the main backer of Ted Coulton. Still, if you ask it—"

"So far from asking you to draw stakes, Ferguson, I've come here to offer you a still better chance: if you can stand the pressure, I'll double the main stakes, and bet you ten times as much on the outside!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A LITTLE PLAIN LANGUAGE.

TAKING everything into consideration, this was a remarkably pretty little bluff, and the best part of it all was that Harry Nash seemed solidly in earnest while making it.

Prince Hamilton gave a short ejaculation of surprised incredulity, but Ferguson stood staring at the speaker, like one suddenly struck dumb.

"You surely can't mean it, Nash?" almost involuntarily exclaimed the Prince. "Why, even if Pottleman wasn't your man—"

"Have I ever admitted he was my man, Prince?" coolly asked Nash.

"No, but—"

"Then quit harping on that string, for its music has grown decidedly monotonous, I assure you. As for you, gentle David, I'm bearing in mind your words of a bit ago; there's no friendship in business. I came here not so much to bet, as to warn you to come to the grounds on the morning of the race, with all your friends, and every pocket among you stuffed with long-green or yellow boys. Be sure your money need not lie idle for long. What few dollars I can't cover will find their match among my friends."

This deliberate speech gave the gambler time in which to rally, and he was ready with his tongue when that of the young plunger paused.

"That's all right, Mr. Nash. I'll be on hand, of course. Still, I've lost too much good money on The Dodger, to care to double stakes as you propose. You were in earnest about it, of course?"

"Did you ever catch me talking through my hat, Ferguson?"

"Not often, if at all. Still, we've got a tidy little amount up as it is, and I really can't see my way clear to double the stakes."

"Well, I'll surely not force you to do so against your better judgment, David. Now—good-morning to you, sir!"

With a bow so elaborate that it fell little short of being an open insult, Barry Nash turned about and left the room. Prince Hamilton followed close upon his heels, but took advantage of his position to give Ferguson a secret sign which that worthy knave readily comprehended. It gave him little consolation, but it was in anything but an amiable mood that the burly gambler descended to his saloon.

No sooner were the two sports fairly clear of the building, than Prince Hamilton slipped a hand through the arm of the young plunger, almost as though he feared being "shaken" by that very independent young gentleman.

Not a little to his secret relief, Barry showed no signs of such an intention. The young man was in his gayest mood, to all outward seeming, during those first few minutes, and openly laughed over the bluff he had given the redoubtable David.

"But it was just a bluff, all the same, pardner?" asked Hamilton, with a little tremor in his tones that told he was far from feeling sure further questioning on that point would not meet with a somewhat similar rebuff. "You didn't actually mean to double up?"

"Just as surely as that I made the offer, Prince. I had the cool cash ready in my pocket, for I looked for some such ending."

"Well, 'twas nervy, very nervy! But—"

"Go on, pardner; but—what?"

"I'd call it mighty bad policy, though!"

"Why so?"

"I thought you'd made a closer study of Dave Ferguson than that comes to, Barry. He's the last man I'd ever pick out to bluff, unless I knew I had a dead sure thing to back me up. He'll play even with you for it, when the race comes off—it will come off, of course?"

"Would I have offered to double stakes unless?"

"I wouldn't think so, unless it was a bluff, pure and simple. Now, Dave will rake and scrape every dollar he can together, and go broke but what he'll back you down in betting on the result."

"I thought something of the sort when I was bluffing him down," quietly spoke young Nash, showing not a particle of excitement in face, voice or in manner. "If he comes up to the track with a big boddle, so much the better for my bank account."

For once in his life, Prince Hamilton was thoroughly nonplussed. As already shown, he had good cause for thinking another disastrous blow had been dealt the man whom he had sworn to crowd to the very verge of ruin, hoping thereby to force a union with Ilda Nash, by promising Barry he should be saved. But now—what did it all mean?

Up to date, he had credited himself with the power to read the mind of this too-honest young gambler, as he might read a printed page; but now he was thoroughly puzzled.

"You really expect to win the match, then?" he stammered, after a brief silence, during which he vainly sought for the right words to help him out of this dangerous muddle.

"Money talks, Prince, and mine says I'll pull it off."

"But Pottleman is not badly hurt, then? You think he can be patched up in time for the race?"

"I haven't said that Pottleman was my Unknown, Hamilton, and I'm not making that admission now," quietly retorted Barry. "Still, since you are so mighty curious, I'll frankly admit that I more than doubt if Kit ever treads the cinder-path again—in racing trim, that is."

"Then who in thunder have you got to run for you, man?"

But that was going a step too far, and abruptly releasing his arm, Barry Nash came to a dead halt, staring coldly, almost insolently into that handsome blonde face.

The Prince was noted for his nerve among sporting men, but this was one of the rare occasions when that nerve failed him. He turned red, then grew paler than ever, and his tongue stammered as it pronounced:

"As a friend, of course, I'd really like to know what—"

"Stick a pin right there, Hamilton," coldly interposed Nash, giving a quick glance around to make sure no others were nigh enough to catch his words, just then. "A friend to the Fergusons, can never call me a friend, without meeting with a call-down!"

"Oh, come, now!"

"I am coming, Prince, and I mean just what I say. I'm beginning to get my eyes open, after so long a time. Of course I knew they were

gamblers, but a man may gamble without turning regular blackleg. Of course I knew they were out after the stuff, but I didn't think even Dave Ferguson would stoop so low as to cut a man's throat in order to get at his pockets!"

"You mean Pottleman's scrape? But Dave swore that he never took a finger in that nasty affair, and I really believe he meant it, too!"

Prince Hamilton spoke glibly enough, and earnestly, too. If an open rupture should take place between Barry Nash and the two most valuable members of his league of conspirators, that conspiracy almost surely would come to grief.

Knowing so much, his acting was genuine enough, just then, and on the score of perfect earnestness, perhaps it deserved a richer reward.

Nash listened quietly, but his strong jaws were squared more than usual, while a dangerous glitter marked his dark eyes the while.

"I wasn't thinking of Pottleman, just then, but that goes, as well. Kit swore to me that he had been bought over, then crippled, doubtless to prevent his running the race out on his buyers."

"I wouldn't believe a professional ped on oath!"

"I'll admit they are hardly above suspicion, as a rule, but Kit's leg speaks louder and plainer than words."

"Doubtless he got his hurt in a drunken spree. I'd mighty sight sooner think that, than believe Dave Ferguson would use such foul means to pull off a stake."

"I'm not trying to argue you out of your opinions, Hamilton. I'm simply giving you a bit of plain language which has been simmering in my mind for more than one day past. And now I'll make it as clear as possible to you, if you'll hear me out."

"Why not drop in somewhere less public, then, Nash?"

"I'm doing tolerably well out here, thank you, Prince. As I started to say, when you chipped in, a friend to the Fergusons can never be a friend of mine."

"Then I'll have to swear off there, as well, old friend."

"I'd rather you wouldn't, Hainilton," quietly said Nash.

"Why not? Surely you don't—what do you mean, anyway, Nash?"

"Wait a bit longer, please. I was alluding to yesterday's affair, when I spoke of throat-cutting. Of course Hi Fitch was paid for losing that race, and the money came out of Dave Ferguson's pocket. At least it passed through his hands."

Prince Hamilton turned almost ghastly pale at that amendment, for there was a look in those black eyes which he hated to see in one whose ruin greatly depended on their keeping on good terms with each other.

Still, the imputation was far too pointed for him to openly ignore it, and he harshly demanded:

"Do you mean to openly insult me, Barry Nash?"

"Not unless you are really anxious to put on the cap, Prince. But this much I will say, and say it so plain you cannot possibly mistake my meaning: I have it on the best of authority that you put money on The Dodger, yesterday, while making me believe you were backing my nag. I know, too, that you found out who my Unknown was: and that Dave Ferguson could only have learned I was backing Kit Pottleman, as an Unknown, through your leaking."

"I flatly deny it all," earnestly declared Hamilton, feeling that he must win back that confidence, or have a much harder fight before him. "I'll take any oath you see fit to dictate, that I—"

"There's a shorter and easier path through the woods, Hamilton," crisply interrupted Nash. "I've been a blessed idiot quite long enough, but now that I've got my eyes open, I'll keep them that way. You may be the very good friend you claim, and then again you may not. I'm taking no more long chances, and I'm too sane to confide further in one who has already proven himself a leaky friend, to speak mildly."

"Are you crazy, Barry Nash?"

"Not now, whatever I may have been of late. I'm not trying to push a quarrel with you, Prince Hamilton, but, all the same, I'm in deadly earnest now. I'll keep to myself until this match is over with, and then if there is further leaking, I'll have only myself to blame."

"If you dare charge me with playing you false, Barry Nash, I'll—"

"I told you once, and I say it over: I bring no actual charges against you, Hamilton, beyond playing double with me over the race and betting, yesterday; but—"

"I flatly deny it, and defy your proofs, Barry Nash!"

"All right: I'll show up my proofs, after this match. And you—or Dave Ferguson, if you prefer his figuring as Coulton's backer—can be sure you'll have a foot-race for your money, if I have to put on the shoes myself!" declared the plunger, turning and striding rapidly off, without giving the enraged sport time to retort or reply.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BANK CLERK'S PREDICAMENT.

Tom Hinton sat "on the loose," and Thomas Hinton at his desk during banking hours, were two very different persons, so far as outward seeming went. The first was all chaff, banter, good-humored insolence; the other was little short of a model machine, speaking only when the occasion demanded, working industriously, like one who has an eye to the future and a further advancement.

As a natural consequence, this model behavior did not pass unnoticed by his superior officers, and while the young gentleman certainly was in little danger of growing wealthy off his salary, more than one little favor was turned his way in consequence.

On the other hand, Arthur Maynard seemed content to earn his salary as easily as might be. He was far from satisfied with his position, and took no particular pains to hide his sentiments on that point. It was better than working on the streets, because easier, and more genteel. But he certainly did not intend remaining a slave of the pen and ledger all his life.

"Expect to pick up a fortune, eh?" one day Tom Hinton laughingly asked his fellow clerk.

"Yes. I've got my eye fixed on one right now!" coolly retorted Maynard.

This "picking up a fortune" became a standard joke with the fun-loving Thomas, and he rung still another change on that time-worn tune when, two days after that rupture between Barry Nash and his false friends, three days after the great race between Silver King and The Dodger, Hinton returned to the bank after taking his customary half-hour for lunch.

With a shy glance around to make sure no other eyes were taking notes, Tom slipped a small, folded paper into Maynard's hand, whispering the while:

"Sh-h, pardner! Don't blush; and keep mum! From your fortune, boy!"

Without pausing for question or to give further explanation, Hinton passed along to his own particular station, at once burying himself in an enormous ledger.

Maynard flushed hotly at words and touch of the paper, although he more than half-suspected fun-loving Thomas of perpetrating one of his ridiculous jokes upon him. Of course this could not be a note from Ilda Nash, for, how and why should she elect Tom Hinton as a messenger?

Satisfying himself that no curious eyes were turned his way, Maynard stole a glance at the closely folded and sealed note. He was fairly familiar with Ilda's writing, and at once recognized the difference. More, he recognized the hand which had indited the name.

"Mattie—what can she want, now?"

The bank clerk turned pale with strong emotions, but breaking the seal, he unfolded the scented paper, to read the words:

"MY DARLING BOY:—

"Drop everything and come here at once, if you would keep me from committing suicide! Come, or my death lies at your door! Come, at once, or I will have to follow this scrawl in person! I must see you before the clock strikes three, or—perish! Come, as you love me—as I love you, Arthur!"

"MATTIE."

Those words, seemingly so full of wild excitement, caused Maynard's brain to turn dizzy, and for a brief space all was a blur before his eyes. He could see nothing, could think less, and yet those words seemed ringing through his ears, now spoken by the beautiful woman whose name was appended, now coming in the deep, dignified tones of the pompous cashier.

With a desperate effort Arthur rallied his wits, and first making sure no one was watching him suspiciously, he once more read those lines, finding in the bastily-formed characters confirmation of the almost hysterical words: she who wrote them surely was in a state of strong excitement, or in great physical peril.

He shivered and turned sick at heart as he read that awful word: *suicide!*

In fancy he could see that matchless figure, that gloriously beautiful face: the one mutilated, the other distorted by pain which either knife or bullet had caused.

Suicide? Mattie Ferguson? And that death caused by his—his—

Surely he had not meant—had done nothing that could justify such words, much less such a terrible ending as this threatened.

True, he had whispered many soft nothings in her ear whenever occasion offered: and that ear had seemed more than willing to give heed to his whispers, too!

What had he better do? Such women were reputed dangerous as a lighted match in a powder magazine, and Mattie—what was it she wanted of him? How could he save her from perishing? Why should—

"Confound the crooked luck! Just when all was going so smoothly with Ilda, too! I wonder—"

But wondering failed to help him in this sore quandary, and in faint hopes of gaining more light, Maynard took a document or two in his hand as a convenient shield, then passed over to where Tom Hinton was busily scratching away with his pen.

"What can I do for you, Maynard?" asked Hinton, in the clear but subdued tones which seem to belong to the business. "Oh, I see! What now, pardner?" he added, in a whisper.

"Where did you get this note? Who gave it to you, and why?"

"On the street; a rod or two from the steps; a boy, because he mistook me for you, no doubt," glibly lied Hinton. "Not bad news, surely?"

Maynard mumbled something: just what, he could never have told. He returned to his own desk, and once more began wrestling with that problem. It had been difficult enough while he only went as deep as that first awful threat, but how much worse it became when he gave the note a third reading, and for the first time fully understood the next sentence!

"Come, at once, or I will have to follow this scrawl in person!"

That threat acted upon his heated blood much as a douche of ice-water might, for, should Mattie Ferguson put her threat into execution, and actually pay him a visit at the bank, during business hours, what would be the consequence?

The loss of his situation, as a matter of course, but that gave him hardly a qualm. Even if the woman should not prove as wildly hysterical as her note, she would certainly be recognized by others, and the piquant story would quickly take to itself wings, and reach—Ilda!

That fear lent the poor fellow a bit of nerve, and with a face so pale as to amply bear out his words, he told the cashier he felt very ill, and would be obliged to go home at once.

Permission was granted, of course, and taking his hat and cane, Arthur Maynard left the bank, walking blindly into the devilish snare which had been so adroitly laid for his feet.

Instead of going home as he had said, Maynard turned his face toward that quarter of the city in which the Fergusons flourished. His feet were only too familiar with the way, and carried him thither almost without volition on the part of their master.

He caught sight of the gayly painted front of the saloon and gaming room combined, and through the plate-glass window he saw the burly figure of Dave Ferguson standing back of the bar. That sight brought him a little more to his senses, and with a partial return of nerve, Maynard passed rapidly by the saloon entrance, electing to seek Mattie Ferguson by the passage so frequently used in days gone by: the side entrance.

This was a mode of ingress used by those on confidential terms with the Fergusons, but Maynard had long since won the privilege, and he availed himself of it on this occasion almost without thought.

At his gentle rap, the door was opened by Mattie Ferguson herself, and she rapidly retreated to the inner apartment: the same in which the "Called Six" held their business sessions.

Hardly knowing what he was about, Maynard closed the door and turned the key which he found in the lock. Then he followed the woman to the room, stopping short as he saw her crouching on a sofa, hands covering her face, sobbing violently.

Only for a few moments. Then her head was lifted, revealing moistened cheeks, reddened lids, pain-drawn mouth.

"You have come, then, Arthur?" she murmured, huskily. "You didn't—Dave didn't see you?"

"I came, of course, since you asked it, Miss Ferguson," said Maynard, striving to harden his tone, even as he had hardened his heart against this tearful siren. "You wrote—what did you mean, anyway?"

It was a lame conclusion, but to all outward seeming Miss Mattie was even more seriously agitated.

"Dave—it's all his silly notions," the woman said, her tones to the full as husky as were those of the bank clerk. "He says—he swears he'll shoot you on sight, poor, dear boy!"

"What for? What have I done to—"

"Nothing—nothing, Arthur, and so I've told him, over and over, times without number!" passionately cried the actress, rising from her resting place and swiftly stepping nearer the young man. "He says—how can I tell you, Arthur?"

"If he says I've done anything wrong, anything unbecoming a gentleman, so far as you are concerned, Miss Ferguson, he lies—and you know it as well as I do!"

"So I told him, over and over again, but—you know how hot-headed Dave can be, at times, Maynard! He swears that you've been playing me false, and that he'll shoot you like a mad dog if you don't—"

"Two can play at that game, if it comes to shooting, Miss Ferguson," said Maynard with a fair show of courage, even while he was trembling through strong emotion; not fear, so far as mere love of life was concerned, though.

Arthur Maynard was by no means a hero, nor was he a cur. On even terms he would fight for his life, and fight desperately, too. But he was a coward when it came to a certain point; he feared the publicity which would follow a fight in the private rooms of a professional gambler.

"You know that I've done no wrong. You

can freely clear me of any wrong-dealing so far as you are concerned, Miss Ferguson. I've said a few silly words, of course, just as any young man might, when with a charming woman like yourself; but that is all. You know that?"

Miss Mattie heaved a sigh so deep that it was almost a groan. She looked just as though she mourned that fact, even while obliged to confess the bank clerk was correct in his assertions.

"I know, and so I told Dave," she huskily murmured. "But he is so headstrong, so hot under the collar, that— Oh mercy!"

The door was rudely flung open, and with leveled pistol, a man cried:

"Hands up, and steady, there! I'll drill you if you try to kick!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

GAINING THEIR ENDS.

If ever a man meant stern business, David Ferguson appeared to be that very individual just then.

The door which Arthur Maynard had so carefully locked behind him, proved no barrier to the indignant brother, but flew open at a touch, and before the startled bank clerk could fairly realize his peril, he was staring into the black muzzle of a cocked revolver, over which gleamed the reddish eyes of the burly gambler.

As the bravest of men will do under like circumstances, Maynard instinctively obeyed that harsh command, his hands flying upward with almost ludicrous celerity. And yet, oddly enough, perhaps, instead of being worse frightened, the young fellow felt actually relieved.

It was one thing to face down a tear-dropping woman, and quite another matter to confront a raging man, whose hand is gripping an ugly-looking pistol. Yet, of the two, Maynard infinitely preferred dealing with the latter, revolver and all.

"Up it is, Dave Ferguson, but show me fair play, man. I'm not heeled, just now, and you—"

"David—don't shoot!" quavered Mattie, shrinking back as though smitten by terror of bloodshed.

"Why shouldn't I shoot, Maynard?" harshly demanded the gambler, his aim steady as a rock the while. "Haven't I caught you in the very act of—"

"Stop, brother!" interposed Mattie, rallying as by a desperate effort, drawing her superb figure erect, yet not going so far as to interpose that figure between pistol and victim. "I sent for Mr. Maynard, and he came in answer, like a gentleman!"

"And, like a gentleman, too, he's been getting you talked about all over town! What have you to say to that, Art Maynard?"

"Talked about—I've never said a word to—"

"Nor given other people cause for saying more than a word, eh?" the gambler cut in, with a savage scowl.

"Never, sir!" almost as sternly declared the bank clerk, plucking up courage once more. "I give you my word of honor, Ferguson, that I've respected your sister far too highly for that. I've never forgotten that she is a lady, and as such I have not only treated her whenever I've had the pleasure of being in her company, but I've never spoken of her outside these walls, save as I might of any other lady, sir."

"I told you the same, Dave, but you wouldn't listen to me," petulantly said Mattie, drying her tears: for tears there were, though how produced will always remain a mystery.

Like one convinced against his will, Ferguson lowered his weapon, though he still held it in view. He frowningly gazed into one face after the other, as though trying to catch fresh inspiration there.

"All the same, there's been entirely too much talk going on about Mattie, and as her brother, Mr. Maynard, I've the right—which I certainly mean to maintain—of asking what you're going to do about it? Speak out, man!"

"I've never treated Miss Ferguson other than as a lady, sir," Maynard declared, beginning to chafe under the bullying manner.

"That isn't the point, and you're smart enough to know it, sir. You have compromised her by your attentions. You have set all the sports talking, and laughing, and—worse even than that! Now, in one word: what are your intentions, Art Maynard?"

"Oh, Dave, how can you!"

"Shut up, Mat. 'Tisn't your put, girl. I'm talking to you, Maynard, and I say it once more; what are your intentions? Are you thinking of marrying my sister?"

An awkward question to answer, particularly when he who put it was a red-headed man of notably fiery temper, and in whose practiced right hand a revolver was gripped!

A braver man than was Arthur Maynard might well have shown irresolution under such circumstances, so it ought not to be laid up against the young fellow if he hesitated before making reply.

He cast an almost appealing look toward the woman in question, and received a sign in return: had he read its meaning aright?

As though to make away with all possible doubt on that point, Miss Mattie crisply interjected:

"I tried to keep you from playing the idiot, Dave, but you would have it your own way! Mr. Maynard is not in love with me, and only his gentlemanly instincts have held his tongue still so far."

"But you—don't you love him, Mat?" bluntly asked Ferguson.

A wave of rich color came into that face, and its owner quickly turned it away, as though ashamed to let her emotion be seen. Still, her voice was fairly steady as she hastened to reply:

"That isn't the point, brother, and you have no right to ask such a question. Let Mr. Maynard tell you the truth, for himself."

"I've treated Miss Ferguson as a lady whom I was proud to call my friend, Ferguson. On my honor, there's been nothing between us two which you could find fault with."

"You would marry her, then?"

Miss Mattie gave a curious sort of gasp, but neither spoke nor turned about. She seemed waiting for Maynard to give his answer.

Although he believed his life in no slight peril, the bank-clerk plucked up courage once more, and though his tones were far from being as steady as customary, his speech was readily understood.

"I'd be only too happy, Ferguson, if I was a free man, but—you understand—I'm not, so there!"

"What do you mean by not being a free man?" harshly demanded the gambler, meaningly toying with his weapon the while. "Surely you are not already married?"

"No, but I expect to be. In fact, though it's a secret, as yet, I'm engaged to be married to—a young lady," desperately declared the young fellow.

"Who is it—if any one at all?"

"Miss Ilda Nash, since nothing less will content you, sir."

Maynard flushed hotly as he pronounced that name. He was lying, but he believed that happy day was not far away in the future, and he must escape those toils. To be mixed up in a shooting scrape, under a gambler's roof, about a gambler's sister—and that sister one who dealt faro for choice spirits!

What was a little lie in comparison?

As though she had only been waiting for this announcement, Mattie turned upon her brother, a smile upon her really handsome face, a touch of womanly malice on her tongue, as she cried:

"Didn't I tell you you was making a mountain out of a mole-hill, Dave Ferguson? Now you've brought the blush of shame to my face, I do hope you're satisfied! If not—well, I pity you!"

"But you—I thought you wanted—"

"To take another woman's lover? Bah! you make me awfully tired, David the Stupid!"

Miss Ferguson broke off with a silvery laugh, as she passed over to the well-supplied side-board, taking therefrom glasses and a decanter of brandy, together with a bottle of champagne. She was still laughing when she placed these upon the little table, then said:

"I know you'll never forgive us, Mr. Maynard, for making such a holy spectacle of ourselves, but when Dave gets a notion into his head, there is only one way to rid him of it: to laugh, and shame him back to common-sense after this fashion."

The burly gambler seemed wholly taken aback by this abrupt transformation of a weeping Ophelia into a mocking bacchante, while Maynard was hardly less amazed.

Still the relief he felt at thus having those ugly doubts brushed aside, enabled him to rally quickly, and his laugh mingled with the musical notes from those rich red lips.

"You see just how it stands, Ferguson," he said, with a gayety which was not all forced. "If I had only met Miss Mattie before—well, my loss is her gain, that's honest!"

"As if I'd have taken you, under any circumstances, little boy," the woman mocked, yet with a touch of sadness underlying her words which Maynard was keen enough to detect and weak enough to feel highly flattered over. "I need a man like Dave, big bear! One who'd love me one hour, flog me the next!"

"Well, I reckon it'll have to go, since you're both bent that way, growled the gambler, placing a chair for the bank clerk. "Sit down, Maynard, and we'll humor Mattie so far: bury hard feelings in harder drink, eh?"

Nothing loth, under the exceptional circumstances, Maynard accepted that blunt invitation, and as the fair siren poured a portion of the brandy into a glass which she placed before him he accepted the dose without demur, though he was never a heavy drinker, and rarely touched brandy.

Still, just then he would have accepted a dose of verjuice from her fair hands without openly rebelling, so highly elated was he at escaping safely from such an ugly situation.

Miss Mattie refilled her glass from the champagne bottle and joined the men in the toast which she herself pronounced—good luck to the engagement just announced, and might nothing occur to postpone or prevent its happy consummation.

Maynard honored that friendly toast by drain-

ing his glass, and in the fit of coughing which that above-proof poison caused him, another portion was deftly dropped into his glass by Mattie Ferguson without her action being seen or her treachery being suspected.

Dave Ferguson played his part equally well. To all seeming he was partly under the influence of liquor already, and each recurring dose rendered him more nearly maudlin. He lamented the shameful fact that evil men would chatter about matters which did not in the least concern them. Only for their worse than idle tongues, nothing of this little unpleasantness would have transpired.

Mattie, likewise, was bitter in her denunciations of the evil gossips, at the same time averring that she held Mr. Maynard entirely free from all blame.

He had ever treated her like a lady, and if the vast difference in their life-stations was not a barrier, nothing would give her more exquisite pleasure than to form the acquaintance of the bride-elect, if only that she might bear witness to the manly treasure that happy young lady had secured in this, their mutual friend.

In his fear lest such an introduction was about to be proposed, Maynard swallowed his second potion, almost strangling as a consequence.

The result was speedily perceptible. He felt that he had taken more than enough for his own good, and with an instinctive feeling that trouble might come unless he beat a retreat, he rose to his feet: only to reel, and be caught in Ferguson's arms while falling.

"Put him on the couch, Dave, for the present," said Miss Mattie, rising to her feet with an impatient gesture. "Deliver me from an idiot! I could 'dope' any man with brains in half the time!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

MAN AND MONEY MISSING.

If nothing else, that verbal quarrel with his false friends worked a change for the better in Barry Nash, since it sent him home to spend his nights, in place of "racketing 'round town," as had been his habit for so long a time past.

It was too soon to look for anything like a radical cure, of course, but those who had the young man's interest most deeply at heart, could hardly help noting a change for the better, beginning with that race won by Silver King, after all was so perilously near lost.

It was pretty much as Barry had given Prince Hamilton to understand: he was getting his eyes open, and meant to keep them free from bewitching dust until he could take stock, and ascertain just where he stood, in a moral as well as a financial sense.

In those few days, he did more sober thinking than had troubled his brain for a full year past, and it must be confessed that the "clean-up" was anything but satisfactory.

Still, his sporting ardor was not cooled; the fever had been born in him, and would die out only with his life. He mentally pledged his honor to enter into no more "plunging" events, after the race made with the Unknown against Ted Coulton, but to content himself with the honor of victory, rather than the hope of heavy winnings.

All this heavy thinking, however, failed to greatly disturb this healthy young fellow, and if he was earlier to bed of late, he was not much the sooner out of bed in the mornings.

The hour was later even than usual when he came down on this particular morning, but he found Ilda awaiting his coming, as customary since his presence could be depended upon.

Careless in many things, Barry was an affectionate brother, after his bluff, off-hand fashion, and at once saw that something had gone wrong with, or was troubling the little lady.

Her face was much paler than usual, and despite the smile which she forced to her lips with her morning's greeting, it bore signs of sore uneasiness.

"What is it, Lady-bird?" Barry asked, catching that face between his hands and gazing keenly into those troubled eyes. "If you haven't been crying, the water has come perilously nigh the surface. Not a quarrel with the happy-to-be, Ilda?"

"Don't—oh, Barry!"

That touch, that look, gentle and loving as it was keen and penetrating, proved just the little that was needed to unseal those fountains. Ilda began to cry, but one hand managed to show Barry that the main cause lay in the morning's issue of the *Republican*.

With a half-fear lest his gaze fall on another blow at himself, Nash took the paper and a seat, to give vent to a half-smothered exclamation of indignant surprise as he came to a display-head above a column of local news.

"Man and Money Missing!" was the head-line, and directly below that was to be read the name of Arthur Maynard, in heavy type.

The article itself was of considerable length, and hence cannot be reproduced here in its entirety. Boiled down, the matter amounted to no less than a positive charge of theft against Arthur Maynard.

After telling who and what Arthur Maynard was, or had been, the item went on to state that, on the day previous, a package of bills, amount-

ing to ten thousand dollars, had been stolen from the bank at whose counters young Maynard served as entry clerk.

As a matter of course, he had not been seen to take, or even touch the package of money, but circumstantial evidence was conclusive as to his being the criminal.

Clerk Hinton told how, while coming back from lunch, an unknown boy gave him a note, then skurried off before he could ask any questions, or, indeed, take notice that the note was not directed to himself. When he saw that it bore the name of his fellow clerk, he passed it over to that gentleman, who seemed greatly surprised, even agitated over its receipt.

The cashier admitted giving Maynard permission to leave the bank, on his plea of sudden illness. He was pale, and seemed far from well. He alone, of all the bank's force, left the premises until after the loss of the money package was discovered, shortly before the hour for closing the doors.

A significant fact was that the closest search and most persistent inquiry had failed to find the missing clerk, or any clew as to where he had gone after so strangely deserting his post at the bank.

Through her tears, Ilda Nash watched her brother while he read the long item, and it was plain she had little hope to gather from that source. From frowning, Barry Nash fell to scowling, and before his eyes came to the last line, a muttered oath crossed his lips.

"Barry, don't—you can't believe such a terrible thing of—*It is not true, and I know it!*"

He turned even paler than she was, for this unusual agitation seemed confirmation of a fear which had been troubling him not a little of late days.

"Does it hurt you so bad, little girl?" Barry asked, crumpling the paper up and casting it aside as something loathsome. "If this ugly charge should prove true, you could bear it like—like our father's child, Ilda?"

"I could bear it, but—I will not, I cannot believe he is guilty of such a base action! You don't think he is, Barry?"

"All I know is what the paper says, of course. That may be lying, or exaggerating the matter. Still, where's so much smoke, there surely must be some fire, Ilda."

"I'll never believe it until—the idea!" breaking into a hysterical laugh, born of indignation against herself. "He'll never admit it, and I'm worse than an idiot for saying anything of the sort!"

Through all, Barry Nash was keenly watching his sister. She was strongly affected, of course, but—was it the indignant agony of a maiden who loves the being so accused?

He could not quite believe that, and the doubt was very grateful to his troubled brain, just then. It was this which had given him many uneasy minutes of late, and this it was which so sorely troubled him while glancing through that sensational account of the robbery.

"I'd hate to believe it a true bill, sissy," he said, thinking it wise to feel his way yet a little further. "Maynard has seemed pretty white, taking him by-and-large, and we've seen a good deal of him of late days. At one time I was beginning to fear that he and you—"

"Oh, don't—Barry!"

Ilda drooped her head, sobbing afresh. Her hands trembled perceptibly as they covered her face, and that fear returned with doubled force to trouble the young sport.

Confound that impudent reporter! What right had he to even hint at such a thing in connection with an accused thief?

"You're not such a little goose, Ilda, and I know it!" Nash exclaimed, almost involuntarily, as he recalled that thinly-veiled allusion. "There's nothing of the sort between you and Maynard—is there?"

A hysterical sound; half-moan, half-giggle. Nothing heroic, certainly, but very natural, for all!

With clumsy haste, Barry dropped to his knees by Ilda's side, using gentle force to remove her clinging hands and cause her dark eyes to meet his keen, half-fierce gaze as he slowly spoke:

"Tell me that infernal reporter drew on his imagination for his facts, sister. He wrote that Maynard was betrothed to—well, no names were given, but he surely pointed you out! I'll break his neck for him, sure as grass grows and water runs down hill!"

"I didn't—I wouldn't—no, then, you great bear!"

Barry gave Ilda a hug which admirably suited her epithet, and his worst fears vanished.

"Thank Heaven for so much, anyway!" he declared, drawing back and resuming his chair, with a long breath of relief. "You looked so cut up, lady-bird, that I began to fear the fool boy had drawn you into an entanglement which—it isn't that way, then, sis!"

"If you mean an—an engagement, no," murmured the maiden, blushing painfully. "He wanted—he asked, but I wouldn't—"

"You don't like him that well, surely, Ilda?" frownedly demanded Nash. "He's not fit for you, even if there is no truth in this charge."

It was an embarrassing subject, and none the easier to touch upon from the fact that, for a

year or more past, there had been few confidential chats between brother and sister. Barry had been wholly absorbed by his sporting arrangements, and Ilda had been left without a guardian, so to speak, ever since her recall from the East, where she had been at school, by the death of her father.

Still, the little woman had inherited a share of the courage which had fallen to her brother, and after another effort, she spoke with a degree of frankness which Barry hardly dared hope for, or relished when it came.

"I didn't just want to, Barry, but he was so urgent, and I didn't have any one to advise me, so I—I told him be might hope—just a little hope, though!"

"Nothing more than that? You didn't tell him you'd marry him, I hope, Ilda?"

"No, for I wasn't sure—yes I was sure!" with sudden energy. "I knew I didn't like him, *that way*, and never could! But—he was so much in earnest, and pleaded so beautifully, that I just couldn't—"

"Help playing the coquette, eh?" with a grim chuckle which was in the main a token of intense relief. "Well, it's all over now, of course. Even Art Maynard couldn't have the cheek to press his suit, after this sort of business. Even if he can clear himself, which I more than doubt, he can never come prowling 'round here any more."

"You speak as though you believed him guilty, brother!"

"Well, I'm simply going by what's in the paper."

"Part of that is false, why not the remainder? I know he is innocent, Barry, and if you love me, you'll do all that lies in your power to help clear away this awful shame! You will—for my sake?"

"If you'll promise never to bid another man 'hope,' yes, lady-bird."

Nash spoke in a jesting tone, but underneath lay stern resolution, as Ilda was keen-witted enough to divine. Meekly enough she gave him that pledge, and after a brief meal, the young man left the house, on his errand of mercy, if such it may be called.

His first thought was of the police, and he at once paid a visit to Headquarters, where his acquaintance with the chief stood him in good stead. His card won him speedy admittance, and after exchanging greetings, he bluntly asked:

"What news of young Maynard: have you nabbed him yet?"

"Not yet, but we hope to run him in before long. My men are following up a favorable clew, and even if that should fail us, Maynard can't long give us the slip. He's good as jailed, Mr. Nash."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREAT UNKNOWN.

BARRY NASH was but little the wiser when he left the office. He may have been a bit more inclined to think Arthur Maynard a runaway thief, but that was all.

He had won a promise to have information promptly sent him, when anything new was discovered, and feeling that he had done all that lay in his power for the time being, he hastened away to keep an appointment made with Martin Todd, at his hotel.

Although an hour later than the time set for their meeting, Martin Todd was patiently waiting for the young sport, talking with Kent Kasson across the little table on which cigars and liquor rested.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting, gentlemen," greeted Nash, breathless from his hasty leaping up-stairs. "Couldn't get around earlier, because of that—Read the locals this morning?"

"About young Maynard? Yes. Ugly scrape, isn't it?"

"Ugly enough, even if it isn't all true: and I'm afraid he's put his foot into it, up to his neck, this time, too!"

"Looks that way, for a fact. Still, what can you expect, when a clerk on a nominal salary, takes to playing blood? The two things never have worked together, and never will."

"Judge not, lest ye be judged, brothers," solemnly croaked the Preacher Sport, yet giving a doleful sigh which even more plainly expressed condemnation of the erring.

"Well, I'm hoping for the best, and have done what little lies in my power for the poor fellow. Now—what's the best word?"

"Pottlemore is progressing as well as could be expected. I've paid him a call, and spent a full hour in making sure none of the gang was piping me off, too!"

"I didn't mean—Of course I'm glad to hear Kit is doing well, but how about our Unknown?"

Martin Todd gave a dry chuckle, and his left lid closed in a knowing wink as he made reply:

"He's all right, Barry! Fine as silk, and fit to run for a crown!"

"Honest? You're not trying to brace me up for—Confound you, old friend! Why will you keep me all in the dark, like this?"

"Well, Nash, it's pretty much as you told our mutual friend, Prince Hamilton, the other day:

the fewer in a secret, the less chance for a dangerous leak, don't you see?"

"But I'm not—he's my Unknown, isn't he?"

Barry Nash forced a laugh as he spoke, but his face plainly betrayed his annoyance. He was not accustomed to having his wishes ignored after this fashion, and, after all, was it not his money that hung in the balance?

"Now you're getting hot again, Nash, and that's against the rules and regulations, made and provided by we, us, and company! If the gang was to see your face right now, wouldn't—" "They can't see it, so that falls by the way. In one word, Todd, will you let me fully into your little game?"

"In a word, *I will not!*" came the blunt retort.

"Have patience, Brother Nash, and unto that virtue, add another, yet more sublime: *hope!* Though the black clouds lower, and the bright sun hideth its face, know ye not that pure light shall come forth from darkness at the appointed time?"

"Oh, if you're going to preach—"

"Mock not, dear brother," earnestly quoth the missionary, taking that reluctant hand and fervently clasping it between both of his, for a wonder ungloved. "All is being wrought for the best, and though the unruly member which our mutual friend waggeth so nimbly, lacks a little of desirable polish, he meaneth well. Have faith, brother, and verily I say unto you, we'll get there, just the same!"

Barry Nash broke into a laugh, which blended admirably with Todd's grim chuckle. The threatened rupture was cemented, and the Preacher Sport smiled meekly as he realized as much.

"All right, and faith I'll pile up, even unto the mountain-top, dear brother," he said, with a close imitation of those nasal tones, which by no means lessened the degree of mirth which belonged to Martin Todd. "Still, I'd like to know something of what you've been doing. Is that too much to ask, gentlemen?"

"Being in reason, never a bit too much, my boy," genially declared Todd. "All I kicked against, was letting you too deep into our little game, lest that infernally cunning Prince should catch a hint, too soon!"

"I told you nothing more than the simple truth when I declared I had broken with him, for good and all, Todd."

"And a mighty good thing for you, too, my boy! Have you split as completely with the Fergusons, though? The gentle Mattie?"

"Yes. I haven't been near their place. I don't say I'll never go there again, for I may try to get even, as a wind-up."

"The more you don't, the better you didn't, Nash. They're bad medicine, and Mattie is the worst pill in that box! If Maynard has gone to the bad, she's helped him down hill, you can lay long odds on that!"

"I don't doubt that, in the least, but—drop them, please? Tell me about this mysterious find of yours, won't you?"

"None of my finding, but that of Brother Kasson. Only for him, we'd be in the hole, up to our necks!"

"I know, and I'll not forget it very soon," declared Nash, with a bit of a catch in his voice as he looked gratefully toward the Preacher Sport. "If he hadn't done more than pull Silver King through, when everything looked too black for—"

"Cease, I humbly implore thee, Brother Nash," murmured the missionary, with bowed head. "Recall not those degrading minutes! Whenever I recall them—and my nightly dreams are made abominable, thus! Whenever I be think me what would result in case my congregation should ever drop to the racket—oh-ah!"

"Neither cracked, crazy nor drunk, my dear boy," chuckled Todd, in answer to that quick glance. "Just the old sporting blood fighting with religious water, don't you see? You'll get used to it, even as I have, and after the match is pulled off safely—"

"It will be pulled off, then? Confound you, Todd! I'll play even with you, if it takes me a solid year to put up a job to match this one of yours!"

"Be sure it pays me as big money as you'll make out of this, and you can't come back at me any too soon to suit your uncle, Nash! I tell you, sport, it's all over but shouting—and raking down the cash!"

"You've given the Unknown a trial, then?" eagerly asked Nash.

"Have I? Well, I should remark! We were out last night again, and ran by the tape-measure. 'Twas dark, as you know, and the bit of ground was anything rather than velvet. Still, I gave the watch fair play, and when I struck a match to look at the figures—I just lay down and took a mule-roll, to keep from yelling, glory to the ram!"

Martin Todd was excited. Less than that wouldn't begin to tell it all. He was intensely excited, and Barry Nash caught a portion of his enthusiasm, forthwith.

He knew that the bachelor sport was an old hand with the timing-watch, and that his nerves were as steady as steel when called upon. If he went into spasms over the night-trial, then the Unknown must be a great find indeed.

"You're sure the gang can't drop to him, Todd? You've got him bid too carefully for that?" he anxiously asked, a few moments later.

"Have you found him out, Nash?" chucklingly retorted the veteran. "Well, no more shall they. I give you my word. They'll think we're putting our hopes on Pottelman to pull us through, and to keep them along that trail, I've taken so much care in stowing Kit away in other quarters. They'll never know better, until our man comes out in running togs, at the hour set for showing up."

Barry Nash was taking covert glances at the grave, meek face of the Preacher Sport. An odd, yet hardly impossible idea was beginning to take shape in his brain. This stranger certainly did not look like an expert racer, yet—neither had he seemed fit to handle the ribbons over a horse on whose heels so many hard dollars were hanging.

He had won the race, as hardly any save a professional could have won it. Then—might he not be just as handy with his heels?

"You found this Unknown, Mr. Kasson," he abruptly spoke out. "Are you as confident as Martin Todd?"

"There is nothing certain save death and taxes, Brother Nash, but to the best of my knowledge and belief—under Providence—we've got a dead sure thing!"

"How long is it since you won a foot-race, Mr. Kasson?"

The Preacher Sport gave a start, shrinking away from the blunt speaker, his face lengthening and his hands flying up as if in horror at the bare idea thus conveyed to his astonished ears.

"What?" ejaculated Martin Todd, in scarcely less amazement. "You surely don't think he's our Unknown, Nash?"

"Can you assure me he isn't your Unknown, Todd?" sharply demanded the young sport, but his face fell as the veteran promptly replied:

"Of course I can, and you're verging on lunacy to even think such a thing, boy! Why, just look him over, will you? Now—is that the get-up of a sprinter, I ask you?"

It certainly was not, and Barry Nash made that admission, after which he resigned himself to the inevitable, dropping that point.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"MONEY TALKS!"

THE day was simply perfect, viewed from a foot-racing standpoint. Clear, warm, with scarcely a breath of air stirring, yet devoid of all mugginess or excess of humidity which is so severe upon laboring lungs.

"Couldn't have been better if made to order, Nash!" declared one enthusiastic member of the little party which was just entering the wide gates at the Driving Park. "I prayed for just such a day, and now it's come, I'm going to wade in over my head, if I never come to the surface again!"

"You say you prayed for this, Vincent?" anxiously asked one of his present companions.

"That's what!"

"Then here's a swimmer who's going to stick mighty close to shallow water, since everybody knows that the prayers of the wicked availeth nothing!"

In quip and jest and light-hearted chatter that drive had been taken by that picked half-dozen, but of them all, hardly one could be said at ease in mind, so far as the outcome was concerned. Barry Nash was the calmest, and his face was unusually pale and sober, even while his dark eyes gleamed with unshaken resolution.

This was an entirely new experience to him, and more than once the young plunger felt that the test was more than he could bear; more than once he angrily declared he would let the race go by default, rather than be kept in such humiliating ignorance as to the actual man his good money was backing.

Just as often, Martin Todd bade him go ahead and tickle his enemies all over by declaring forfeit, and as the shrewd old sport very well knew, just as often would Barry Nash swallow both words and anger, hoping for the best, and eager for the decisive hour to roll around.

That hour was very nigh to hand now. With a particular few of his friends, each and every man among them with money which they were not afraid to risk, and ready to back his judgment as their own, Barry Nash had come to the Park, where the race was to come off.

Even now he knew absolutely nothing concerning the Unknown. Not even at the eleventh hour would either Todd or Kasson lift the vail which they had so carefully guarded during the past week.

"We'll be on deck before sailing-time rolls 'round, don't you worry, my boy!" declared Todd, with one of his grim chuckles, which those who knew him best could tell you meant strict business. "Don't let the gang bluff your pocket, Nash! It's a double-cinch for us, but—ask 'em to save up a few ducats for my eating, will you?"

Kent Kasson said nothing, but there was a benign smile upon his usually lugubrious visage, and he lifted his gloved hands in a silent benediction. Surely he meant well, but—

The Park was deserted save by the compara-

tively few persons who had been taken into the secret of the great sprint. On this occasion, as on all others where a match of foot-racers is made simply and solely as a money-making device, the public was kept in the dark as much as possible. No outside witnesses were wanted by either side.

Vincent gave a little ejaculation of chagrin as his keen eyes caught sight of a number of persons at or near the point which had been selected for the actual test.

"I wish we'd got ahead, instead! There's a mighty sight in getting a good send-off, don't you know?"

"And the last shall be first!" croaked the irreverent jester. "Why don't you ever read your Bible, boy?"

As their truly democratic conveyance crossed over to the track, it was surrounded by the earlier arrivals, prominent among whom were Prince Hamilton and Dave Ferguson.

This was ostensibly to greet the new arrivals, but those eager glances passed each familiar countenance by, as if in search of a strange face; and such was the fact, as the blunt greeting given by Dave Ferguson plainly indicated:

"Better late than never, Nash! Only—I'm hoping you haven't come all this way just to announce a forfeit?"

"The wish is father of that thought, I reckon. Mr. Ferguson," coolly retorted the young plunger, as he left the omnibus. "Sorry to disappoint you so dreadfully, old fellow!"

"'Tis a forfeit, then—and I knew it all along!"

David might be sorely disappointed, but if so he very successfully concealed that fact beneath a broad grin: one of little less than actual relief, a stranger might have imagined.

"Has Ted Coulton flopped over, or has he met with an accident, Dave? I fancied I caught a glimpse of him, limbering up, as we entered the gates."

"So you might, if your eyes were keen enough. Accident! Never a bit of it, pardner! When my good money goes up on a man, he's taken too good care of for accidents to come his way."

"But all go to the other, unlucky devils! Well, if your man is all right, what are you howling about a forfeit, for, David?"

"You—where's your man, then?"

"Keeping out of the way of stray accidents, Mr. Ferguson. When you and your crowd haven't got money enough left uncovered to buy him up, maybe I'll let my fellow show up: if only to give you a glimpse at his heels!"

It was not often that Barry Nash yielded to the temptation of chafing, but this was an exceptional case. Despite the repeated assurances given him by both Martin Todd and Kent Kasson, he was by no means convinced that he stood anything like a fair show to "pull off" the main stakes, or the wagers which he had come to the ground prepared to make. Then, why not taste a bit of pleasure through rubbing Dave Ferguson's hair the wrong way?

The red-bearded gambler pulled out a massive gold watch, to note the exact time, giving a little grunt of impatience as he closed the case with a vicious snap.

"Time enough to do a little speculating, Mr. Ferguson," said Nash, dropping his bantering tone for one more business-like. "Money talks! Mine says that this race comes our way."

"Why, you've turned foolish, man!"

"Why don't you answer a fool according to his folly, then? Of course it's just like finding it for you, but—money talks, and I'm its mouth-piece."

"Then the match is on, and there's no forfeit, Mr. Nash?" asked one of the opposing party, eagerly.

Dave Ferguson gave a coarse chuckle, as one hand dove into his bosom after his wallet. In insolent tones he spoke:

"It might just as well be a forfeit, for all the show they've got to win, Dignam!"

"How much backing can you find for your words, Mr. Ferguson?" asked the younger sport, with almost painful politeness in face and tone.

"It's like stealing it, but if you're so dead bent on having your feathers pulled, my boy, I'll accommodate you. I've got an odd five thousand lying loose—"

"Only five?" echoed Nash, in tones of disgust.

Ferguson flushed hotly, and this soon gave signs of losing his temper, notwithstanding his stern resolve to the contrary.

"Let that be the starter, Mr. Nash. Time enough to ask for more, when you've covered my little pile."

"Well, every little helps, according to the ancient female of historical mention," lightly said Barry, producing his wallet, and opening it far enough to give the gambler fair cause for staring.

Although filled to repletion with bank notes, those visible to his keen eyes were all of high denomination, and Barry Nash had merely to slip out the top five bills to have the amount mentioned.

This surely did not look like paying forfeit, and once more Ferguson began to suspect that capricious fortune meant playing him a nasty trick. Still, he had gone too far now for re-

treating, and when the young plunger lightly tinted those bills before his face, he said, gruffly:

"Let the Prince hold stakes. I'll cover your wad in a minute."

Almost involuntarily Hamilton took a forward step, his hand lifting to clasp the precious bits of paper, but a crimson flush came into his face as Barry Nash drew back, shaking his head.

"Excuse me, Mr. Ferguson, but, really, I prefer another stakeholder."

"What do you mean?" growlingly demanded the burly gambler.

"Just what I heard you say not many days since, David: 'There's no friendship in business!'"

"Am I to take your refusal as an insult, Mr. Nash?" coldly demanded the Prince, his face pale as that of a corpse, but his blue eyes catching a reddish luster which was far from agreeable.

"Not unless you really are spoiling for a row, Mr. Hamilton. If you are, I'll try to accommodate you, even in that, just as soon as our main business is well over."

"If I thought—"

"You are at liberty to think what you please, Prince, but, meanwhile, let's stick to business, Ferguson. Name any other gentleman, or you name one, and I'll name another, those two to pick a third, who can hold all stakes we are concerned in. How does that suit you?"

The offer was so fair that Ferguson could raise no objections, and so the arrangement was made. When the money was staked, the young plunger came again, maliciously fluttering the ends of his bank-notes before David's eyes while bantering him to back his expressed judgment.

"You've got my pile covered, Mr. Nash," sulkily muttered the gambler, plainly betraying how sorely he was stung. "If I'd known—"

"I gave you fair warning to come clothed in all your pomp and magnificence, Ferguson," mocked Nash, making the most of the moment. "And after that, a miserable five thousand is all you could scare up!"

"Name your own sum, Mr. Nash, and I'll give Dave my personal check to cover it, no matter if you run up to six figures!" sharply cut in the Prince, openly siding with the enemy now that the test had come.

"Thanks, Prince, but I'm dealing in Government promises to pay."

"Do you mean to insinuate that my check is not good, sir?"

"It may be better than gold, under other circumstances, but I'm doing a cash business today. I gave you all fair warning to come here with your pockets full, and if you neglected my—"

"I'll cover every dollar you or your friends can scratch up, and leave my check as security until I can drive to town for the cash."

"There's no friendship in business, Mr. Hamilton," maliciously repeated his rival, taking out his watch to glance at the dial. "Just five minutes before the hour strikes, gentlemen! Money talks, and I'm listening for an answer! Even Stephen that my Unknown wins this race!"

There were a few takers, but Barry Nash was still betting when the time ran out. Then he swung his hat high above his head, and in answer to that signal, a close carriage appeared from near the training stables, and as it drove briskly around the track toward the little crowd, all there recognized Martin Todd on the seat with the driver.

CHAPTER XXX.

A MASKED ENIGMA.

AT the same time, a covert signal from Barry Nash led all his personal following to separate from the other party. Not alone those who had come with him in the omnibus, but nearly thrice as many others, who had rendezvoused at the Park, prepared for sport or work, just as the coming events might declare, now moved in his company, and a glance showed that, so far as mere numbers went, the opposing factions were pretty near equal.

"Don't tramp on our heels, gentlemen," coldly spoke Barry Nash, he cast a glance backward. "Of course, I can understand your curiosity concerning the Great Unknown, but business is business, and I can't afford to have another good man crippled by—an accident, of course!"

It was a very thickly disguised challenge, and so it was understood.

Nearly every one then present had had some experience in matches of this sort, and not one among them but knew full well how often such matches had ended in pistol-shots and knife-thrusts.

"Hold the boys back, Dave," muttered Hamilton, in guarded tones. "We don't want a free fight—just yet!"

"Steady, gents!" cried Ferguson, instantly taking his cue. "We've got the dead clinch on 'em as it is, so don't give 'em even the ghost of a show to back out, then squeal to the courts for their money!"

His speech was loud enough to reach the ears of the other party, and Barry Nash smiled grimly. No other notice was taken of the taunt, however, for just then a head was thrust through

the lowered window of the hack, and fully as ignorant as their opponents of the Great Unknown, Barry and his friends pressed forward to greet—Whom?

"All's well, Brother Nash," declared the owner of that head, sight of which once more threw the young sport into a quandary.

All his studying, reasoning, thinking, had offered him but a single solution for that perplexing riddle: Kent Kasson surely must be the man who was going to race for his money. But now—

The door opposite that through which the rusty hat and glaring goggles were protruded, was opened, and a tall, lithe, yet muscular figure sprung forth; a figure already attired for the track, as was shown to all eyes as that masking ulster was removed and tossed to the hack-driver.

"I'll attend to the hack, Brother Todd, if you'll kindly keep an eye over our friend on the outside! And you, Brother Nash, please see that our man has a fair chance to limber up, will you?"

While speaking thus, the odd-looking combination of religion and sport, alighted from the carriage, only to scramble awkwardly up to a seat beside the driver, who was admiringly watching the Unknown.

And well he might, too!

There are not many more attractive spectacles than a perfectly proportioned man, and no place or costume better calculated for displaying those masculine attractions than the racing-path and racing rig.

The Unknown was clad only in racing shoes, which hardly covered more than the soles of his feet, barely clasping the trim heels, yet so securely fastened in place that he could almost as easily have shed his skin itself; in very scant trunks of crimson silk, held in place by rubber cords; and a closely fitting mask of white silk, which came down to his lips.

Under the lower edge of this mask, a light brown mustache could be glimpsed, shading a pair of red lips, below which was a massive chin, cleft in the middle: the chin of a man who could be depended on to "hold his end level" in any and all company.

His well-shaped head was but scantily covered with blonde hair. He was not bald, although a casual glance left that impression, but his hair had been closely clipped.

In height the Unknown fell a little short of the six-foot standard, but his build was so perfect, his members were so beautifully hung, and so symmetrical in themselves, that one hardly thought of such details.

Least of all now, as the stranger began "limbering up," his feet striking the firm yet springy earth with an audible "spat" at each bound: for bound it must be called. At each stroke, his elastic figure rose in the air as if from a rubber foundation, altogether differently from the racing stride, but admirably calculated to "loosen" each and ever muscle for the test which was in store.

It was a perfect picture of graceful power, and as he gazed, Barry Nash felt his pulse quicken and his sporting blood to tingle afresh. Never until now had he looked upon a perfect racer!

With no less eagerness, but with vastly different emotions, the Prince and Ferguson crowd had watched and waited for what was to come.

They had in measure respected that cold warning flung back for their benefit by Barry Nash, and paused while still at a respectful distance from where the hack had drawn up.

They were not so far away, however, but that the face and voice of the Preacher Sport was instantly recognized, and a mutual curse passed the lips of both Ferguson and Hamilton. Were they to owe a second bitter defeat to that infernal fraud?"

Then they caught sight of the figure which emerged from the door opposite that through which K-nt Kasson was talking, and then they lost sight and thought of all else.

"He's a good looker, anyway," muttered Ferguson, nervously, "but who in blazes can he be?"

"It's not Pottelman, for one thing!"

Very viciously did those words pass Prince Hamilton's lips. Up to this very moment, he had hoped Barry Nash was simply playing a bluff game, on the long chance of scaring his opponents into making a compromise favorable to his pocket. Until that superb figure left the hack and trotted up the course with those peculiar bounds, he had clung to the belief that, if any man was shown, Kit Pottelman would be the one.

"Do you know him, Ted?" asked Ferguson, turning toward a mouselike shape which was standing near, in a slouchy, ungraceful attitude. "It isn't Pottelman, that's dead sure! But—who is it?"

Despite his seeming carelessness, Ted Coulton was watching that shapely figure with almost painful intentness. He gave a start and a frown at this abrupt address, and his answer was none to swift.

"That's what I'm trying to study out, boss! Tain't McIvor, nor Johnson, nor Bethune, nor Gibson, nor the Dallas Boy, nor—"

"Devil swallow your 'nors,' man!" growled

Hamilton, viciously. "Who is he? that's what we're trying to get at!"

"Get me a square glimpse at his face, and I'll—masked, by gum!"

The Unknown had turned, some little distance up the track, and now was facing those curious watchers, drawing nearer with each springy bound. For the first time they caught a fair view of that white blank, hence the sharp ejaculation given by Ted Coulton.

"If it isn't Fred W. Stone, then I can't even give a guess, boss!" finally declared Coulton, with a long breath as of relief.

"Who is he? You can down him, Ted?"

"If it's Old Fred, yes. He's been mighty nigh the first rank, though just missing getting there, you understand. If it is Stone, and I begin to believe that way, the race is ours, to a dead moral!"

"Try and find out, Ferguson," sharply said Hamilton. "It's time to settle down to business, and that can be your excuse. And you, Ted, strip and limber up a bit, my man!"

In his eagerness to solve the masked enigma, the Prince bore David company on his venture, but as they approached, the Unknown turned and once more trotted up the track, a body of his friends forming in line across the track, as though determined not to permit a closer inspection.

"I see your man has showed up, Nash," bluntly began Ferguson, knowing that diplomacy could avail him little in this case. "Who is he, anyway?"

"If you really are anxious to learn, why not ask the gentleman himself, after the race is won and lost?" coolly retorted the sport.

"Oh, come off, man! What's the sense in trying to make a mystery out of it, any longer? It's time now for the match to come off, and I merely asked through curiosity to know who we're running against."

"That's all right, gentlemen. You were ready enough to make a match on Ted Coulton against my Unknown. I backed an Unknown to win the race, and an Unknown he'll remain until that race is decided; on its merits, too, mind you, gentlemen!"

"Good as old wheat!" bluntly chipped in bluff Martin Todd, whose face was surely that of a victor, just then. "We've had one man crippled through just such p'izen curiosity, and we're not anxious to lose another after the same fashion."

"What do you mean by that, Todd?"

"You keep an eye on the Unknown, Mr. Todd," crisply interjected Nash, then facing Ferguson sternly, to add: "We mean business, pure and simple, David, and don't let that fact slip your memory, please. You can't kick up a row just now. We're here to run for the stuff, and until that is decided, we're strictly peaceful."

"Then why throw out such dirty hints?"

"If guiltless, those hints can't apply to you, of course. Still, if it sticks in your craw, I'll argue the case with you after the race, in any shape you nominate. Can I say fairer than that?"

Before Ferguson could reply or retort, the gentleman who had been mutually agreed upon as starter of the race, called forth sharply:

"Time, gentlemen! The contestants will come to the score!"

CHAPTER XXXI. THE GREAT FOOT-RACE.

ALTHOUGH the call was made for the sprinters to come to the score, that was little better than a matter of form, in case there remained aught else to arrange concerning the race itself.

Couched in different phraseology, it gave all concerned information that the first of the two hours between which the race must come off, had arrived, and that in case of a failure to get into position for the start within the next succeeding sixty minutes, he, the starter, would either declare the match off, or give the race to that one of the contestants who appeared at the score, to run over the required distance.

This official, on whose coolness and impartiality so much depends, had been settled upon when the match was first made, and as he was known to be not only fully competent, but above bribery or corruption, neither side had taken steps to depose him. To do so would be a pretty fair notification that fraud was intended, and up to date the Coulton party had felt far too confident of receiving full forfeit, to even give a thought that way.

Now, it was entirely too late.

"Don't strain yourselves, gentlemen," called forth Barry Nash, as Hamilton and Ferguson turned away. "Tiburman isn't in nearly as big a hurry as he lets on, and we've got time to divide a national bank between us. Come! neither sand nor sugar among ye all? Must I lose the interest on all these bits of paper? Not even a baby bet to be had?"

"And I'm clean left, am I?" disgustedly cut in Martin Todd, lugger forth his own well-supplied wallet. "Can't stir up even a cub of the howling tiger, eh! Not with a pole twice as long? Two to one that the Unknown wins this race! Two to one, and nobody barred! White, black, red or yellow! Two to one, and I'll buck

up against a Johnny Green, if nothing better offers!"

There is no surer method of forcing a sporting man to put up his good money against his better judgment, than by pelting him with chaff, liberally spiced with mocking bluffs.

This day was no exception, and by freely using his practiced tongue, the bachelor sport succeeded in placing several bets for enough to make the winning well worth the trouble.

Neither of their principal opponents, however, were to be caught further. Ferguson had no more cash with him, and if Hamilton had, which was hardly likely, since he had offered his check only to have it refused, he preferred to keep the same under his own control.

"What do you think of it, anyway?" asked Ferguson, in growling undertones, as he moved away in obedience to that sign from the Prince.

"Looks rather rusty, to tell the truth. I'd give a little pile if we could have sighted that fellow in mask, just one day before!"

"Well, we didn't. I'd give a pile if the match was anything but Sheffield rules, though!"

Hamilton readily understood that allusion, but did not feel it necessary to defend his action in causing the match to be thus made.

Still, he was none the less sorry than was Ferguson, for if the conditions had been the same as customary in money matches of this sort, Coulton could at least have saved their stakes and caused all bets to be declared off, simply by refusing to cross the starting line in company with his opponent.

Under the rules which are such favorites with "skin peds," or "fifteen yard scratch, mutual consent," he who feels himself overmatched can, by delaying the start until darkness comes, save his backers all loss save that of a few hours' time.

Among the few other preliminaries which had to be attended to, was the selection of judges for the tape, or finish, and with little delay each side made known their election: Martin Todd for the Unknown, and James Walker for Ted Coulton.

By the time everything was arranged by mutual consent the rival sprinters had completed their warming-up process and were ready for the test.

Howard Thurman, the starter, a bluff, hearty Englishman of the middle classes, called both racers and their backers to him, near the score.

"I'm a man of few words, gentlemen, as some of you already know," he began, with cool resolution showing in his face, even as it rung forth in his tones. "I never asked for this position. It was fairly forced upon me, I might say."

"Simply because a better man for the position couldn't be scared up between the two oceans," frankly declared Barry Nash.

"All we ask is a square deal for our money," growled Ferguson. "And with you as a pistol-firer we're dead-sure to get that much, Thurman."

"I'll not thank either of you, gentlemen, for right is right, and it's no compliment to say that a man means to give all a fair show. What I say now applies to all, or to neither. As starter, I'll see that everything is square at my end of the hundred. If either man tries to jockey his opponent, I'll call him down and inflict the penalty. If either man tries to get the start of the pistol, he'll get—left!"

"One word to the gentlemen selected as judges at the tape. You have nothing whatever to do or say about what happened at this end of the hundred. That is *my business*, and mine alone. All you have to decide is which man breasts the tape first. If there is a dispute, and the finish-judges can't agree, then the referee shall decide. Have you selected that official, gentlemen?"

Mutual assent set this important point at rest, then Thurman drew the starting-line still deeper with the point of his cane. This done, he called out, in clear, stern tones:

"Keep the track clear, gentlemen, if you please. Bear in mind that if either of the sprinters is interfered with by an outsider, I'll give the race to his backers, without protest."

"Even if he should be interfered with by his own friends, judge?" asked Barry Nash, pointedly. "Isn't that putting a premium on fraud?"

"I've very good eyes, Mr. Nash, and I know every man here on the grounds. I'll know who interferes, and just why they try it on—if they see fit to run that risk."

"That's more than enough, sir, and I'm satisfied."

"Men to the score!" sharply cried Thurman.

During these preliminaries, the Unknown was quietly walking back and forth, arm-in-arm with the odd-looking Preacher Sport, who appeared talking earnestly to the stranger, though his tones were so guarded that none of the others could catch a syllable.

At this summons, the Unknown flung off his ulster, which was caught by his companion, who hurried away to where the hack was standing, just inside the race-track.

No one appeared to notice his action, then, but it was recalled at a later moment.

Ted Coulton likewise appeared, stripped for

the race, and the rivals promptly took their positions, as indicated by Thurman. The toss of a coin had decided which side each man should have, and they were placed accordingly.

The Unknown was the cynosure of all eyes, during those first few minutes, but he paid no attention to outsiders, and merely gave a covert glance or two at his adversary while planting himself for the signal to start.

"Look at him!" muttered one of the Hamilton party, his husky tones showing how seriously his fate was shaken in their champion. "That's no novice, man! Who in blazes can he be?"

"I know who I begin to wish he was; our man!"

Using the long spikes which formed part of his shoe, the Unknown dug a little hole back of the scratch, into which he fitted his right foot, resting on its ball and toes, giving him a firm foundation from which to spring forward.

His left foot almost touched the scratch, and on this foot his weight was poised, easily, yet solidly. His right arm was straight and rigid, almost in line with his extended right leg, while his left arm was thrown forward, bent at the elbow, ready to swing sharply back, just as the other arm would be flung forward at the crack of the pistol.

At a casual glance, he seemed motionless as though a statue carved from marble, but in reality there was a gentle swaying back and forth as he waited for the signal, showing how completely every nerve and muscle was held under his control, ready to act as an entirety when the supreme test should come.

Ted Coulton acted much in the same manner, but his form was not so perfectly proportioned, nor so gracefully handled. Still, he was noted as a good starter, and famed for both fleetness and pluck.

There was a grim, almost fierce grin on his bony face, and as though anticipating trickery on the part of this Unknown, he kept watching him closely, never removing that suspicious gaze for an instant.

Howard Thurman drew back of the score, standing behind the sprinters, out of their sight unless they should glance squarely over a shoulder. His hands were hidden behind his back, one gripping a cocked revolver, the muzzle of which pointed to earth, the other clasping the wrist of the armed member, loosely.

"Steady, Coulton! Remember, this is under Sheffield rules, not by mutual consent. I'm saying when the start shall be made, and if necessary, I'll hold you on the mark for a solid week. I'm here to see that each man has a fair show, and here it he shall!"

"Steady! You can't beat the pistol, while I hold it, so don't cry. If you cross the score by even the fraction of an inch, I'll set you back, and would though you were my own son! Steady—steady!"

This sharp lecture produced the desired effect, for to be penalized for a false start, would almost surely mean the loss of the race.

Then—the pistol was discharged!

Thurman had judged admirably, and both men being fully prepared, they left the score together, instantly falling into their stride, amid a general gasp—it could not be otherwise called—from the excited spectators.

For full forty yards they ran as though coupled together, Coulton crouching, seeming awkward enough, but covering ground at a tremendous rate. The Unknown ran almost erect, his body hardly swaying, but his muscular legs carrying him along in a remarkable stride.

At the half-way mark, the men were still nearly even, but when the third quarter was reached, those who were stationed at that point, saw that the Unknown was gradually forging ahead of his rival.

Not far, but many a good race has been won by an inch, and Coulton had his orders to "run from end to end." If he had already done his best—he had, as his actions now but too plainly proved!

He flung out an arm, as though through accident, but his clinched fist was aimed for the Unknown's stomach!

The foul blow never reached its mark. Without altering his stride or swing of the arms in the slightest, the Unknown struck that arm down, then sped on, breaking the tape fully a yard in advance of his rival!

CHAPTER XXXII. STILL THE GREAT UNKNOWN.

WITHOUT breaking his stride, or altering his form in the least, save to lift his arms on high and permit his breast alone to strike the tightly drawn string which marked the finish, the Unknown sped on, as though unable to check himself.

All was excitement the most intense, and where every outsider had religiously respected that stretch of level ground while the race was on, now that it had been decided, they rushed together like parted waves, shouting, yelling, cursing and gesticulating like so many lunatics turned loose for a holiday.

For the time being the racers were forgotten by that little crowd, and few, if any, took note that, instead of gradually slackening his pace and turning about to learn the decision given by

the finish-judges, the Unknown kept on until he reached the hack, jumping inside, to be followed as quickly by the Preacher Sport.

This was the truly critical moment, which has so often been marked by savage strife and bloodshed. The race had been lost and won, and as yet only a few of them all save the finish-judges, could say with certainty just how the test had ended.

"Steady, friends!" thundered Barry Nash, as he came swiftly down the track. "Hold your temper, all! Give the judges time to consult, if they need it. Don't crowd—there's time enough for everything, remember!"

Other cool-heads took up this cry, and a good effect was at once perceptible, for that mad rush was checked, and all hands seemed willing to wait for the verdict, though more than one ugly growl was heard accusing Ted Coulton of fouling his adversary, while just as many voices hotly denied the charge.

"Don't be too mighty friendly, gentlemen," sternly warned Martin Todd, a hand resting suspiciously nigh a visible revolver at his waist. "We'll talk up plain enough for the deafest pair of ears among you all, but—we never could bear to be crowded!"

"All right, Todd, but—which man won?"

"After you is manners, Jimmy," with a nod toward his fellow judge. "How was it, man?"

"What do you say, first?"

"That the Unknown broke the tape, fair and square, one yard ahead of Coulton. That's my decision, now deliver yours!"

But Walker still "hung fire." It was hard to say the words which would lose so much good money for his employers, but—and so he caught at a straw!

"Well, I would like to ask Thurman how the start was?"

"That's nothing to you, sir," bluntly replied the gentleman named. "All you have to do is to give a decision in strict accordance with the outcome."

Walker turned very pale, and his eyes flashed toward his employers. His very hesitation told one and all just how the race had gone, but he could not acknowledge as much, until he received permission from one or the other of his masters.

Dave Ferguson would not give that. His eyes were lowered, his jaws set in savage rage and hatred. Prince Hamilton was in no sweeter mood, as may readily be surmised, but he was still cool and crafty enough to realize that nothing was to be gained by making a fight over what was past mending, and he gave a slight nod.

Jimmy Walker caught that signal, and felt relief the most intense.

"Well, of course I hate to go against my own friends, but—*Ted did come out behind!*"

No sooner were the words across his lips, than a curious change came over the crowd. Up to that moment they had been blended together as a single mass, now they instantly divided, forming two distinct bands.

It was easy enough to distinguish the winning side from the losers, for greater contrast could hardly be imagined than was thus presented.

One body whooped and shouted and laughed, the more enthusiastic lugging a mate, to join in a crazy dance, as though nothing less violent in the way of action could even begin to express their delight.

The others, sullen, scowling, silent save for an occasional whisper from lip to ear, seemed uncertain what step to take next.

Prince Hamilton alone possessed the will-power to force a smile to his unusually pale face, and then, just when his sullen adherents were looking for him to give a sign which would precipitate a free fight, he stepped over to where Barry Nash was receiving the congratulations of his friends over his grand victory, and extending a gloved hand, spoke with seeming frankness:

"Permit me to add my hearty and sincere congratulations, Mr. Nash. Your man won the race on his merits, and the money is yours. I only wish it was twice as much!"

"It wasn't my fault that the sum is so small, Hamilton," retorted the young plunger with a light laugh.

"Better luck next time, then," still with that placating smile. "I offer you my hand, Nash, and hope you'll join me in burying all hard feelings which may have risen between us. Over mistaken thoughts, I'm dead sure, too!"

"Shake it is, since you seem to wish it that way, Prince," and their hands closed in a firm grip. "Now the match is over, without any further accident, why not?"

A slight flush came into Hamilton's face at that emphasized word, but it was no part of his plans to come to an open rupture, if such could be avoided, and he passed that ugly hint by without remark.

As he fell back a bit, a peremptory flash from his eyes brought Dave Ferguson to the front, with a painfully forced grin on his broad face.

"You're on top again, Nash, but I reckon you deserve your good luck. Still, I'd like to ask you just one thing, if I may?"

"What is it, Ferguson?" asked Nash, in his turn, but ignoring the hand which the gambler had awkwardly extended for a shake.

"Who the devil is that fellow of yours, anyhow?"

"Meaning my Unknown, of course, David?"

"To-be-sure: who and what is he?"

"I wish I could tell you, Ferguson, but I really don't know."

"Oh, come off! Who is he, man, dear? You can't get on another match, here in Denver, at least, so what's the use keeping so shady?"

"Ferguson, I'm sadly afraid that one point of your education was neglected in your youth. You don't seem to recognize the plain truth when it's shoved right into your two eyes."

"But you know who you was putting your money on, of course."

"That's where you're out again, my doubting Thomas," coldly retorted the young plunger, meeting that angrily-suspicious gaze boldly as he added: "If you can understand what that means, sir, I give you my word of honor that I never so much as laid eyes on the man who won this race for me, until the instant when he left the track, here on the track, this very day. Is that plain enough for your limited powers of comprehension, Mr. Ferguson?"

"Well, if you won't tell, he shall, or I'll—Where the deuce has he gone to, anyway?"

The gambler stared around in almost stupid amazement, for not only had the Unknown vanished, but the hack, its driver, and the Preacher Sport had disappeared as well!

A little light was given him by a malicious winner, who had not been too greatly excited to lose all thought of the Unknown winner. The hack, with Kasson and the stranger victor, had been driven swiftly away, and by this time was doubtless pretty well on their way to the city.

Now that the race had been given up as fairly lost and won, it did not take long for the stakeholders to pay over the money wagered on the track. That put up when the match was made, of course, was on deposit in the city, subject to the winner's order.

These little but important points settled, the party left the Park, Barry Nash going with Martin Todd, in the veteran's wagon, which had been driven to the grounds by a couple of friends, who now took seats in the omnibus for the return drive.

But few words were spoken by either of the sports during the first few minutes of that ride. They both began to feel the strain under which they had been living for the last few days, and which had so recently reached its climax. Still, it was beyond human nature to remain silent for very long, while such a puzzling mystery kept intruding on his brain, and finally Barry Nash broke forth with:

"It's over, and I'm mighty glad of it, old friend. I'll never enter into another such affair, for twice the money I've won! Now—tell me who this wonderful racer really is, Todd?"

"I would if I could, but I can't, how can I?"

"But—you surely know, man!"

"But—I surely don't know, man! That's honest, Barry," with increasing gravity as he frankly met that wondering, doubting gaze. "I don't know his name, or his station in life. I merely know that he's a man Kent Kasson picked up, the day after Pottelman was crippled."

"You don't—Pardon, Todd, but it's mighty hard to swallow! Still, I believe you. Then, who under the sun is this Kent Kasson?"

"Now you have got me, Barry Nash!" declared Todd, with a puzzled frown on his honest face. "If he was playing on the other side, I'd be willing to take oath he was Satan himself! Since he's chipping in on ours, I'll just call him our good angel, and let it go at that!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

BAFFLED, BUT NOT BEATEN.

It was not until some little time later that the chief conspirators left the grounds where they had met with such heavy losses. And because those losses had come just when they felt the most confident of winning, that blow had fallen the more heavily.

The different manner in which that blow was borne, told something of the difference in the mental caliber of the two men: Ferguson had few thoughts outside of the money loss, while Hamilton looked to the roots of the matter, as well as took a shrewd glance ahead.

Forced as they were to believe in the truth of the young plunger, they could hardly credit the information given by one of the winning side: that the Unknown, in company with the Preacher Sport, had driven away from the Park on their way to the city.

Knowing as they surely must what powerful curiosity would be stirred up by that winning in mask, would they risk being followed and run down by the main losers?

"It's odds they're skulking somewhere," muttered Hamilton to Dave Ferguson. "Let the rest go, but we'll see if we can't make a strike, after all."

"If we do find 'em, what then?"

"We'll learn just who and what they are, or—there'll be a job for the undertaker, sure!"

Prince Hamilton meant all those crisp words implied, but fortune willed that the end should

be different, and they failed to discover aught of their mysterious adversaries.

When fairly certain that, wherever else they might be, neither Kent Kasson nor the Unknown was to be found inside the Park limits, the two baffled schemers entered Hamilton's wagon, and drove off in the direction of town.

Both were savage over this fresh defeat, and hardly the less so because the loss was less than it surely would have been, only for the manner in which Barry Nash had declined to accept Hamilton's personal check as "good money."

"'Twas a lead pipe cinch, but not just as we reckoned it up," grimly growled Ferguson, unable to tear his thoughts from those winnings which had gone into the wrong pockets. "He knew that we was looking for a forfeit, 'stead of a race. He knew he had a world-beater in that masked devil. Then—why did he toss your offer over his shoulder?"

The Prince had a very clear idea as to that, but as it was hardly flattering to himself or to his pride, he did not take the trouble to fully elaborate it.

"Never you mind about that, Dave. Maybe the cub thought it was worth more to give me a slur. Maybe he wasn't so mighty sure of winning the race as you try to make out."

"Sure! His man could give Coulton two yards and a beating!"

"But if Nash didn't know that, then? You heard what he said."

"And felt like telling him he lied in saying it, too?"

"Just as well for all hands that you choked back that temptation, old man," said the Prince, with a short, dry chuckle. "It was like being in a powder-magazine: safe enough while all went right, but where just one weenty spark'd blow the whole outfit to never-come-back-again!"

"Well, we could have got some fun and more satisfaction out of a ruction, anyway. Why wouldn't you let it come, Prince?"

"Mainly because I hadn't owned up beaten, Ferguson," said Hamilton, his face hardening, his tones growing less agreeable the while. "Even if we could have mowed a clean swath, which I'm a bit inclined to doubt, what good? And I can heap sight easier sum up the evil."

"You've never yet seen Barry Nash in a free fight, but I have. He was fighting on my side, then, and I was 'way-up glad of it, too! This time he'd have been on the other side, don't you see?"

"What matter? He's only one man, and I'd picked him out for my share. We could have done it, just as easy! And the boys rather looked for it to come that way, don't you know?"

"Let the boys go hang; I was looking at my own hand," impatiently snapped the Prince. "As for Nash, you might have killed, but you couldn't have whipped him."

"Well, the sight of his funeral wouldn't set me to buying crapé!"

"Maybe not, but I'd hate most mightily to have it come my way, just yet. You're down in the dumps, Dave, because the young rascal has come out on top again, but—"

"Isn't it enough to dump a fellow, I'd like to know?" sulkily growled the red-bearded gambler. "Look at the boodle he collared to-day! Look at his winnings on Silver King! Why, man, take the two races together, and he's won back mighty nigh all be's dumped at faro and poker, the past six months!"

The ugly frown which gathered those fair brows proved how little pleasure Prince Hamilton found in those memories, but his voice showed no particular emotion as it came again.

"Don't you reckon I know that, David?"

"You'd ought to, but—you don't talk as if you did! Where's the big winnings you promised us? In his pockets, curse him all over! You said 'twould be just baby-play to pinch the cub until he squealed the tune you'd set your mind on hearing, and—well, I reckon I've clean lost my ear for music, pardner!"

"Pity you hadn't lost your tongue for infernal bosh!" fiercely retorted the Prince, his false countenance giving way under the strain to which Ferguson, with his sulky complaints, had contributed no little. "If Nash has won, whose money is it that's lost? Who is backing this game, anyway?"

Ferguson growled, but in subdued tones.

"Yours of course, but—our share was to come out of the profits, and we haven't grown very rich, as yet, pardner."

Hamilton turned toward the gambler, his blue eyes glittering wickedly, his voice just the least bit unsteady as he asked:

"You're trying to say something, David Ferguson, but it sticks in your craw a bit. Out with it, man! You are a man, I suppose?"

"Now you're growing hot, Prince, and that's foolish."

"Never you mind about me; it's your turn just now. You're thinking of riving me the skin, Ferguson, or your law tells lies on its owner?"

"Hasn't Nash saved us both the trouble of calling the game off, Prince? After his talk and banting of to-day, what say can we have of pinching the cub as you counted on first off?"

"Stick to the text, David. Will you play your part, as agreed?"

"Of course, if you insist upon it, but—what can I do now?"

"It was anything save a hearty assent, and only for his unadmitted dread of this steel-nerved sport, David Ferguson would surely have kicked over the traces then and there."

"You can follow orders, for one thing, can't you?"

"I can try, but a mighty sight depends on just what those orders are, Prince, and you'd ought to be able to see that much. Unless you've turned stone-blind all of a sudden, you'd see that the whelp more than suspects the league we've formed against him. He's fighting mighty shy already, and I greatly doubt if you can get another grip on him, with all your keenness, pardner."

"Another grip? Only for your infernal chatter, Dave, I'd have had it all planned out, this soon!" fiercely growled the Prince. "I've got it almost thought out as it is, and when I do—I'll win my main point! I'll pinch the fool boy until he gives way, if I have to squeeze every drop of blood from his veins by dribslets!"

"That's easy to speak: heap sight more easy than to fetch about, I'm thinking, Prince," more calmly said Ferguson.

"I can do it—I will do it! I'm in this game to win, and win I shall, or kill Barry Nash while trying!"

"If things has to go that far, Prince, you can count me and Mattie out of it, right now."

"What do you mean by that, curse you, Dave Ferguson?" viciously grated the head schemer, with an evil glare in his eyes.

"Just what I say, row or no row, Hamilton," bluntly declared his companion. "We've had too much of that already, Mat and I. Take Art Maynard: there he is, weak as a cat, and growing worse all the while! He'll croak, to a moral!"

"Is it as bad as that comes to, Dave?"

"It couldn't be much worse, but that worse is sure to come, and that inside of another twenty-four hours," was the sullen response. "He's crazy as a bedbug, whenever he shows signs of life at all, and I'm looking for the cops to drop in on us any minute!"

"Let him croak, then!"

"That's all right, but how're we to get shut of his carcass?"

"You'd ought to be smart enough to look after that part of the business, Ferguson. I'm sure you've been well paid for both trouble and risk, so far."

"I'm not thinking that way, pardner. If I'd thought there'd be so much risk and bother, I'd never have gone into the trick; that's flat!"

"Well, you did go into it, and now you've got to smooth matters over the best you know how," sternly spoke up the Prince. "You've dilly-dallied long enough, listening to Mat's fool nonsense. Get shut of the fellow this very night, or show cause!"

"But—how?"

"Dump him into the street, and be sure he's dead when found!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

YET ANOTHER COG SLIPS.

As usual, when it came to a match of will against will, Ferguson yielded, and by the time the city was reached, an agreement was reached as well: Arthur Maynard was to be disposed of, once for all!

Leaving the team at the livery stable where he had it boarded, the Prince and his right-hand man at once picked their way to the saloon bearing Ferguson's name on its plate glass windows.

They had scarcely entered the establishment, when the man in attendance at the bar, gave his employer a sealed envelope, a glance at which told him whose hand had written that name.

"When did it come, Billy?"

"Two hours, or such a matter ago, boss."

With fingers which were hardly as steady as usual, the gambler tore open the envelope, extracting the card which it contained. A single glance sufficed to master those few irregularly traced words, and a low, savage curse parted his lips as he turned toward the doorway through which he had so recently entered.

"What's gone wrong now, Dave?" sharply muttered Hamilton, springing after his confederate, reaching his side just as Ferguson struck the pavement in front of the saloon.

"Look at that, will you?"

The gambler thrust that card toward his master, but without in the least slackening his rapid strides, his face now turned in the direction of the private entrance to which former allusions have been made.

Prince Hamilton paused barely long enough to glance at the words written on the card, then sprung after Ferguson once more, his face very pale, his eyes glittering savagely.

"Hurry here—h—ll to pay!"

Those were the forcible if not elegant words which Mattie Ferguson had scrawled in a trembling hand. They might mean much or little, but on one point there could be no doubt: they surely meant no good to the conspirators or their dangerous schemes.

Prince Hamilton was close upon the heels of the gambler as Dave Ferguson dashed open the

door which led into the chamber where the "Called Six" held their consultations, and a simultaneous exclamation of angry amazement burst from their lips as they caught sight of Miss Ferguson, lying on the couch.

Her attire was in disorder, great rents being perceptible even at a passing glance. Her hair was down, and seemed worse than disarranged. Her face bore traces of heavy blows, and something suspiciously like a black eye was forming.

"At last!" she cried, hoarsely, lifting a bandaged hand as she raised herself to a sitting posture. "I thought you'd never come, Dave!"

"Who did it, girl? What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Who but that sweet-scented pet of yours, Arthur Maynard?"

"Where is he? You surely haven't—" began Prince Hamilton, only to be interrupted by the woman, in still sharper tones than those he was using.

"Do I look as though I'd been playing off, Prince? Don't this look as if I'd at least tried to do my duty?"

While speaking, the woman rose to her feet, unsteadily as though suffering from unusual weakness. She tore the blood-stained kerchief from her right hand, laying bare a deep and ugly gash across the palm, then pointed to her bruised and swollen face, after which, with a harsh laugh, she passed her left hand over her head, to hold up many strands of silken hair which had been torn from the scalp.

"Who's done it, Mattie?" hoarsely demanded Ferguson, his face ghastly in its pallor, but with a hand gripping the butt of a pistol.

"Maynard, I said, didn't I?"

Her voice weakened, and to save herself from falling, Miss Ferguson staggered back to the couch, sinking upon it in a trembling heap.

A savage oath broke from the gambler's lips, and crossing the room in a tigerish bound, he opened a door which led into another apartment. One glance, then he whirled about, with a harsh cry:

"Gone! the devil's broke away, Hamilton!"

"How long since, Mat?" sternly demanded the Prince. "No nonsense, but in a word—how long since?"

"Two hours and over—nearer three," huskily replied the woman, with a glance at the little clock hanging against the wall.

"What have you done toward bringing him back?"

"What could I do—like this?" Mattie asked, with a flash of bitterness. "Just nothing at all!"

Ferguson uttered another vicious oath, but Prince Hamilton grew cool and, so far as outward seeming went, composed.

"If he's been gone nearly three hours, others will find him long before we could strike and follow up his trail. Summer down, Dave, if there's sense enough left in that fool head of yours! You'd be a nice mark for the cops, if they should take a notion to drop in on us just now, wouldn't you?"

Hamilton passed over to the outer door, closing and locking it before speaking further. Then, retracing his steps, he sat down, motioning the gambler to imitate his example.

"First thing is to cool off, David. After all, what great harm has been done? Mattie's hurts, and they'll hardly kill the darling."

"I wish you had 'em—had 'em, doubled a thousand times over!"

"Thanks, my sweetness," bowed the Prince, with almost painful politeness. "The physicians all agree that when a patient grows irritable, he or she is in no particular danger of hopping the twig. Given that sweet hope, Mattie, I reckon you can bear up long enough to tell us what in blazes you've been trying to do, anyway!"

Jeeringly though he chose his words, Prince Hamilton was in deadly earnest, and as he had so often done before, these confederates once more yielded to his powerful influence.

Ferguson took a seat. Mattie sat up, and began her story.

"You know how that young fool has been, ever since he was 'doped.' I never knew the stuff to act that way before, but I reckoned he'd really sufficeitly for us to carry out your plans."

"To get him out of town, to be surprised and captured by a brace of honest fellows who had learned of the theft and the reward offered," coolly chipped in Hamilton. "Captured, of course! Unless the desperate thief fought so hard for liberty, they'd be forced to kill him, to save their own lives!"

Ferguson gave a sullen growl. Mattie shivered perceptibly. Bad though they might be, this, their master, was infinitely worse.

"I've nothing to do with, that part of it, Prince. You never even hinted at such a dirty ending when you proposed our trapping the poor boy, or I'd never—I'd have kicked, flat!"

"Doubtless you would. Your sex is noted for contrariness, and that may be my reason for not intrusting you with the entire programme, off hand. But, you set out to say?"

"That I was fooled by the strange sort of stupor in which the fellow lay, all the time. I

paid him a visit, in yonder, and before I knew what was in the wind, he jumped to his feet and tried to break away. I tried to stop him; you can see from my face, and hair, and clothes! He raged like a lunatic, and I feared he'd murder me outright, so I—I pulled my knife on him!"

"And let him have its length?" eagerly cried Ferguson. "Say you gave him its length, Mattie!"

"I did my level, for I thought 'twas his life or mine," muttered the woman, her eyes sinking. "I'm not so sure that I cut him deep, but I tried. And then—he jerked the knife away, cutting my hand, as you saw. He knocked me down—knocked me out, I reckon! Anyway, he was gone when I knew enough to look around. Then—I sent that note to the bar, and waited—like this!"

Ferguson sprung to his feet, but was arrested by the Prince, who sharply demanded:

"What's biting you now, man? Sit down, I tell you!"

"I'm going after that devil, to—He'll blow us all, unless we clap a stopper on his tongue, man!"

"What can he say or do to harm us? Can't we lie him down, if it comes to that? Isn't he a proven thief? Come, Dave, you're all mixed up in your wits, or you'd see it in my light."

"He's right, Dave!" cried the woman, a glow coming into her eyes. "I was a fool not to see it that way before, but now—"

"Now you can see it, almost as plain as you'd ought to see the worse than folly of trying to follow the fellow. If you should, wouldn't that show you were afraid of what he might say? Shake yourself, Dave, and pretend you're a man, if you can't do any better than that."

"If Maynard should be picked up by the police, alive, remember you haven't either of you laid eyes on him since the night before the robbery. He can't prove different, and there we have him: see?"

Every word spoken by this cool schemer helped convince his allies that their fears had been greatly exaggerated, and then, while Ferguson attended to the injuries Mattie had received in her fierce struggle with the crazed bank clerk, Prince Hamilton reverted to the subject which seemed to interest his evil brain so much more deeply.

"Barry Nash is crowing right now, but I've hatched another trick which can't miss winning the game for us. I'll have him in my grip before two days pass by, and then—he'll knuckle, or die!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

PICKED UP IN THE STREETS.

"The chief says he can spare you ten minutes, if that will do you any good, gentlemen," was the report which the trim, natty-looking sergeant of police delivered, just the shade of a smile touching his face as he took closer note of that awkward figure standing before him.

"Thanks, brother," meekly bowed the Preacher Sport. "You are so kind, so considerate, so all-over-in-spots, to fall into poetry, that I'll be sure to remember you in my nightly prayer. Come, Brother Marlow. Far be it from us to keep waiting those set on high in public places, oh-ah!"

A frown came into that official face, and in place of permitting the two callers to find their way to the chief's office through a bare indication of the door, the sergeant himself led the way, entering the office and swiftly dropping a warning in his superior's ear.

"Crazy, or a crank, your Honor! Look out for him, and I'll—"

"That will do, Pierson. Wait without, and if I ring, come at once," coldly pronounced the head of Denver's police system, quickly but keenly taking the measure of these strangers who had requested a private interview, on matters of importance.

One was Kent Kasson, as his speech of meek gratitude amply proved. Outwardly he was the same as ever, and though so recently from the grandly won victory at the Driving Park, nothing of triumph or exultation could be read in his face.

The gentleman who bore him company, Peter Marlow, as his name had been given on the card sent in advance to the chief, was a tall, well-built man of near thirty years of age. He would have been fairly handsome, only for the deep purplish scar which covered nearly half of his right cheek.

"You wish to see me, gentlemen, on official business, I understand?" spoke the chief, after taking note of so much.

"On important business, too, sir," said Marlow, producing sundry documents from an inner pocket, placing them on the desk back of which the official was sitting. "A glance over these will explain, perhaps, better if not quicker than I can."

Those practiced eyes quickly took in the main points presented thus, and, with a slight exclamation of pleased surprise, the chief rose to his feet, offering a hand to each of his visitors.

Before more could be done or said, however,

warning tap at the door was followed quickly by the sergeant on duty, who hastily said:

"Beg pardon, your Honor, but you said if word came in—Jackson reports they've found Maynard!"

"What who's—Come in, Jackson!"

The chief seemed excited, and the burly policeman who entered the room in answer to that sharp summons, was even more so.

Possibly the sight of that flushed, eager face warned the chief to school his own features, lest these visitors take away with them a less exalted opinion of his merits as chief guardian over a great city.

Be that as it may, he mastered his own excitement, and, by his cold, measured speech endeavored to awe Jackson into something like.

"Deliver your report, Jackson. Briefly, and to the point, if you please, my good fellow."

"Orders were given us all to keep a watch for young Maynard, who pinched the boodle at the bank, your Honor, and—"

"I understand all that, of course. You found Arthur Maynard, then?"

"Yes, chief. Found him in the gutter, down Arapahoe, near—"

"Where is he now?"

"At the station, sir. He seemed in a mighty bad way, and I didn't dare fetch him direct here."

"How in a bad way, Jackson?"

"Well, drunk or crazy, one or the other I should say, chief. He'd been mixed up in a row of some sort, too, from the looks, but, of course, I didn't take time to search the thing to the bottom. I reckoned you'd be wanting to learn of the arrest, and so I made all haste here, rather than stop to telephone."

"Begging pardon, but—you say Maynard apparently bad been engaged in a row: was he wounded, brother?"

The Preacher Sport ventured to ask that question, but Jackson turned an inquiring look upon his superior before answering the stranger.

"The gentlemen are all right, and you can speak freely before them, Jackson," quickly vouchsafed the chief. "Was Maynard cut or shot?"

"He was cut, sir, in the breast, and pretty well covered with blood. I did ask him how he came so, but he either couldn't or wouldn't give me a straight answer. He seemed crazy-frightened, if I may put it that way."

Kent Kasson stepped near enough to the chief to whisper in his ear:

"I have good cause for thinking our men are mixed up in this affair, sir. Will you permit us to bear you company to the station, and share the information you may be able to gather?"

"If you wish, of course," was the hearty response. "We'll go at once, and if there's anything else I can do for either of you, all I ask is a hint to that effect, and you can consider it done."

Kasson gave his thanks warmly for this assurance, and when the chief left the place in charge of Sergeant Pierson, the two gentlemen who had played such a prominent part that same day in another act of the drama, bore him company.

Policeman Jackson highly elated at the prospect of fingering the liberal reward which the bank had offered for the arrest of its missing clerk, was more than willing to give further details concerning that capture, but the chief coldly bade him "bottle up" until they were in a less public place.

The station to which Arthur Maynard had been taken, by a rather odd coincidence, was the same to which Kit Pottleson had been removed after his "accident." Kent Kasson immediately recognized the place, and in turn was recognized by the surgeon in attendance.

"You have young Maynard here I understand?"

"Yes, Jackson, brought him in. But, these gentlemen: do you know who and what they are, chief?"

"They are my friends, sir, and I vouch for them."

The surgeon muttered an apology, then led them to the cell in which Maynard had been placed for the present.

His hurts had been attended to, and the surgeon reported that they were only serious through the great loss of blood. But as the curious visitors stood gazing upon the figure lying on the cot, by that dim light, they felt as though they were inspecting a corpse rather than a living, breathing criminal.

"You've drugged him, surgeon?"

"I had to, or see him die of exhaustion, sir. He was raving crazy when brought in, and—"

"I was not—I am not crazy!" feebly protested Maynard, opening his eyes, but vainly trying to lift his body to a sitting posture.

The surgeon instantly sprung to the cot-side, but the poor fellow feebly struggled against that friendly restraint, panting:

"I will—I must tell how—in mercy, hear me I beg!"

"Let him speak," hurriedly advised Kasson, to the chief. "Unless he can free his mind, he'll die—or turn clean crazy!"

"You see, sir?" asked the surgeon, turning to the others with a significant shrug of the shoulder.

ders. "He's has been like this ever since he was run in. He's crazy, lying, or else has been the victim of a bitter black plot!"

"Victim—drugged me!" panted Maynard, catching at that word. "I never stole—Heaven my judge!"

"There's more in this than we've fatbomed as yet," sternly said the chief, his interest deepening as he watched that painfully struggling prisoner. "Give him something to brace him up a bit, surgeon, and see if we can't get at the whole truth."

This came as an order, rather than a request, and was promptly obeyed as such. A potion was quickly compounded and administered, then left to do its work. That did not take long: in his present weakened condition, Maynard was easily affected.

He began his story, and stuck fairly close to the truth, from start to finish. His words came with difficulty, and at times he was forced to cease through weakness. But, through all, he was intently, even eagerly listened to, and one at least of the party took down his story in extenso, just as delivered.

"Is he sane, or out of his wits, doctor?" asked the chief, in a low tone, during one of those breaks through exhaustion.

"I believe he is perfectly sane, sir, but," with a significant shrug of his shoulders, "as for his veracity, that's for you to decide!"

In good truth, it seemed an almost incredible recital, but Maynard declared that, while lying in a stupor, perfectly helpless so far as limbs and body was concerned, but with brain painfully alert, he had overheard Tom Hinton explaining to his confederates just how the trick had been turned.

Hinton had abstracted the package of money, just before going out as usual for his mid-day lunch. He had concealed the package, then returned to the bank with the note which had been provided for that express purpose, and which Mattie Ferguson promised would surely bring their victim into their clutches.

And having gasped his oath that all he said was true, Maynard lay insensible, more than ever like a corpse.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TOM HINTON "SQUEALS."

PLACING all present under charge of strict secrecy, the Chief left Maynard in care of the police surgeon, bidding him use all possible means to restore consciousness and preserve life.

He gave Kent Kasson and Peter Marlow a long and interesting interview, and when that came to an end, it was fully understood that the Maynard case was to be kept a secret, if possible. If the ubiquitous reporters should catch an inkling of the matter, they were to be kept in the dark as to the story told by the accused.

"You have made out a good case, gentlemen," he said, gravely, as the twain rose to take their leave. "I am willing to leave the matter wholly in your hands."

"For which you have our sincere tanks, chief," said Kasson, even more cordially. "When we've gathered in our game, perhaps we can express our sentiments with more freedom."

"Make a clean sweep, and I'll ask no better reward, gentlemen!"

"We'll do that, never fear, sir."

Leaving the building, the two men walked rapidly away, as though the next move was perfectly understood. Not a word passed between them, until they came to a pause in front of a neat-appearing lodging house, when the Preacher Sport broke the silence.

"You will make the arrest, Marlow, and do the talking. If you meet a balk, or need help, I'll chip in."

With this understanding reached, they were about to approach the door, when it opened to give passage to—

"Hinton! take him, Peter!" swiftly muttered Kasson.

No quicker spoken than acted upon. A strong hand slipped through an arm of the softly whistling clerk, and as he gave a start of angry amazement, a stern voice muttered in his ears:

"Easy, Mr. Hinton! I've got a gun feeling for your ribs—just so! Make a sound louder than a whisper, and down you go, for keeps!"

"Don't shoot!" huskily muttered the clerk, shivering as that hard substance began to bore into his side, between himself and that strange accoster. "Take my wad, but—"

"We're not robbers, brother," gently chipped in the Preacher Sport, at the same time taking possession of Hinton's other arm, and forcing him along the pavement. "You are simply arrested on charge of robbing the bank in which you act as clerk."

Far from reassuring the young man, this quiet hint caused him to tremble worse than at first, and for a few seconds he hung a limp and nerveless weight upon those strong arms.

"Don't try to kick up a row, or think you can break away, Mr. Hinton, for that will only change your arrest into an open one. I've got some very pretty bracelets handy, if you're really bent on wearing them."

"I don't—I'm innocent, gentlemen!" muttered the panic-stricken wretch. "Maynard stole that money, and I can prove it!"

"That's enough for just now," sternly added Marlow, as their pace was quickened. "We're taking you to a place where you can tell your side of the story at ease. Until we get there, button up, please."

Fortunately their destination was not far distant, and the trio were snugly ensconced within four walls before Tom Hinton could fairly rally from that totally unexpected shock.

The door was closed, the shades drawn over the windows looking upon the street, a lamp was lighted, and all three men seated, before any further explanation was given the bank clerk.

Then it was Peter Marlow who did the talking, as a rule. Thanks to the story told by poor Maynard from his cot in the police-cell, he had a fair basis to build upon, and he made the most of his advantage.

"You say Maynard stole that package of money, but the facts tell a different story, my dear young friend," he began, with cool mockery in his tones. "I've met up with good forgetteries ere this, but yours is about the worst I know of! Now let me refresh your brain, Hinton."

"You pinched that package, just before going out to get your lunch. You stowed it away in a place of safety, so that, in case a premature discovery took place, you wouldn't have that ugly evidence to speak against you."

"I never—"

"Be quiet, or I'll have to ask you to chew on a gag, my dear boy! I say you did, and I'm fully able to prove all I charge you with doing. And then, having rid yourself of the package, you took the note which Miss Mattie Ferguson had so thoughtfully provided you with in advance, and delivered it to Arthur Maynard. He, silly boy, was scared into obeying the command that note contained, lest the woman pay him a visit at the bank."

"He went to the Fergusons, and while there, was drugged to insensibility. He was held a prisoner, in a safe place, and once upon a time, while seemingly unconscious, he heard you bragging over the way the trick was turned."

"But he— It's all a lie!"

"It's all truth, and unless you buy yourself a lighter sentence, that same truth will put you in stripes until your head turns gray, Thomas Hinton," coldly retorted Marlow.

"You can help yourself, Brother Hinton, if you see fit to make a full and free confession," gravely interposed the Preacher Sport.

"And so condemn myself?" asked Hinton, plucking up a certain degree of courage. "I'm innocent, and I'll never convict myself of another man's crime!"

"You need not do that, for it's already done. Your only show is to lighten that punishment by blowing the gaff on others who are even more guilty than yourself. Prince Hamilton is at the bottom of all this, and he dragged poor Maynard into the plot, simply in order to dispose of a real or fancied rival in love."

"I know nothing whatever about it, I say, for the last time."

"I give you five minutes in which to reconsider your determination, Brother Hinton," quietly added Kasson, placing his open watch on the little table between them. "If, at the end of that period, you have not concluded to squeal on your pals, we'll run you in, to pay the full penalty due your crimes. Not *crime*, mind you! Arthur Maynard is lying at the point of death, and unless you can fix the deed on other hands, you will surely be met by that charge, as well as theft."

Then the bank clerk broke down.

His nerves having given way before that terrible strain, the rest was comparatively easy for those two keen-witted men, and little by little the whole atrocious scheme was laid bare.

Prince Hamilton was the originator of the bold scheme. At first it was merely a struggle for the money to which Barry Nash and his sister had fallen heirs, but as the game progressed, Hamilton fell madly in love with the young lady, and altered his plans accordingly.

He gathered such tools as he thought he could make most useful, giving each one a part to play, each and every step to be taken under his instructions alone.

Barry Nash was to be fleeced as rapidly and as completely as possible, and when driven to the last extremity, was to be forced into backing Hamilton's suit for Ilda Nash's hand in marriage. If he yielded to argument, he was to be given back his money, Hamilton contenting himself with the fortune belonging to his lady-love, and from it paying his allies for their labor.

"And if he refused to force his sister into such an unholy alliance, what was to be done?" coldly demanded Kasson, his eyes gleaming vividly.

"Nash was to be taken to some place where he could be pinched at will," reluctantly admitted Hinton. "If nothing better offered, a bogus message was to be sent, as if from one of his mines, bidding him come there without delay. He would be captured while on his way, then—well, he'd never see daylight again, unless he yielded."

"And if Nash still defied that demon, what then?"

"Then 'twould be *her* turn to feel the grip," still more reluctantly muttered the trembling wretch. "Through love of her brother, the Prince felt he could surely win his point."

Kent Kasson, as though completely disgusted with the affair, turned away, motioning Marlow to hasten the conclusion, and producing paper and a fountain-pen, that gentleman quietly spoke:

"One more little favor, Mr. Hinton, and then we'll give you a rest. Oblige me by writing to my dictation, will you?"

"Who to? What for?"

"To each one of your pals, of course. As to the other question, you can study its meaning out at your leisure. Just now—*write!*"

Thoroughly cowed, Thomas Hinton grasped the pen and obeyed.

Peter Marlow dictated notes to the two Fergusons, to Prince Hamilton, Jimmy Walker and Timothy Dooley. The text was pretty much alike in one and all, simply stating that he, Tom Hinton, had made a very important discovery, which closely concerned the league. He begged the one addressed to meet him at Ferguson's gaming-room, without fail, on the night following; he dared not attempt to see them sooner.

"It's a little risky, giving them so much rope, but we can't well turn the trick to-night," said Marlow, frowningly, as he read and folded the notes.

"If any of them try to levant, they'll meet with arrest so much the earlier," quietly said Kasson. "Now we'll take Brother Hinton to his new quarters, friend Peter."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE LAST OF THE LEAGUE.

THE game at Ferguson's was under full headway, and while nothing was to be seen of the bewitching Miss Mattie, who occasionally honored the table and fascinated the players with her regal presence, there was a partial recompense offered, since the young plunger, Barry Nash, was seated at one of the faro-tables, betting heavily, and with a fair share of the good luck which appeared to be "coming his way" so steadily of late.

As such things always will, the story of the foot-race had leaked out, and somewhat elaborated for the occasion, still held the interest of the sporting world; and those who had been barred from sharing in the lively play itself, tried to content their injured feelings by watching and gossiping about the principal actor himself.

There was something more than mere curiosity in this growing interest, however, and some of those who had the bump of caution well developed, made it a point to keep near the exit, while taking their notes.

The air felt uneasy, if not actually unhealthy.

Nearly all of those named by rumor as having played more prominently in that little affair at the Driving Park, were in attendance on this evening.

Dave Ferguson was moving quietly about, keeping an eye over everything, ready to lend hand, foot or voice, whenever such should seem essential to the fair workings of his establishment.

Prince Hamilton was there, smoothly smiling, bland and genial as ever to the ordinary eye; but a close observer might have noted an unusual glitter in his eyes, and an occasional twitch of the muscles about his mouth, both telling of suppressed excitement or uneasiness.

Among still others who were to make that evening a memorable one in sporting annals, may be mentioned Kent Kasson, the Preacher Sport.

He had but recently entered the place, leaning on the arm of a tall, well-built man, upon whose right cheek blazed a bright scar as of a terrible scald or burn, but even so soon the missionary had begun to draw notice his way.

That battered tile was drawn far over his head, yet cocked at a rakish angle which hardly agreed with the profession followed by its owner. The glasses were present, but placed awry on that nose, and even the baggy umbrella had taken on a rakish, devil-may-care air, for that occasion only.

For, sad to relate, the reverend gentleman surely was under the influence of strong waters, and temporarily forgetting his cloth, the Preacher was rapidly yielding to the Sport.

"Whoop-er-ree, and whoop her up!" cried Kasson, checking their progress with a lurch, jerking his arm from the control of his companion, the better to record his emphatic opinions. "He who prigs my weasel-skin is a dandy, but the one who can take it by— Stop the room! Who started it swinging 'round the circle? Who— who said I'm drunk?"

An ugly look came into Dave Ferguson's face as that oddly-pitched, cracked voice rose above the regulation key, and with quick steps he crossed the room to where the reverend gentleman was swaying dizzily back and forth in his sudden effort to assert his dignified sobriety.

"We're just delighted to have gentlemen drop in on us, my very dear sir," said the burly gam-

bler, tapping Kasson on an arm by way of insuring his attention, "but those gentlemen must act as such. You're disturbing the players, and will greatly oblige by moderating your tones a trifle. See?"

"Though I have been looking, yet see I naught!" croaked the Preacher Sport, an expression of vexed distrust creeping into his face the while. "Though I have been seeking, yet find I nothing! Oh, for the good old days when sports were sports, and you had only to crow aloud, to see a dozen brave cocks fairly breaking their necks trying to be the first one to take a buckle!"

"I've known necks to be broken right here, my stranger friend, and that because their owners tried to out-crow the crowd. Take a fool's advice, and simmer down a bit, or else let your feet carry you to a safer stamping-ground."

Kent Kasson gazed bewilderedly into that stern, forbidding face, but apparently he failed to catch the covert meaning underlying that mock-polite warning.

"Gentle stranger, brother waif on the shores of—he who keeps nigh the shore when deep waters invite, is a coward and a craven! Who speaks first? Lo, and behold! I'm a pilgrim and a stranger, but I bringeth my boodle with me! And that boodle is exceeding plump, ay! 'tis crammed to the nozzle with long green, and every dollar of it all says that I can poke longer, poke harder, poke deeper, and fetch up better cards than the mightiest chief of ye all! Who'll—did you speak, Brother Ferguson?"

"I'm speaking now, and unless you're the fool you try to look, you'll pay attention to what I'm saying, too, Mr. Kasson," harshly said the proprietor. "I'm here to maintain good order, and unless you keep inside those limits, you go out—in a heap!"

"Mournful Moses!" groaned the disgusted sport, as he replaced his plump wallet, then gave a melancholy flourish with his umbrella. "Can this thing be a living reality? Am I waking, or hath a horrible night-hoss taken up his abode upon my midriff? Have I been deep buried in slumber, while a cruel monopoly hath passed a law against an honest sport losing his money if he'd rather do that than see it grow blue-moldy for lack of exercise?"

"There's no law against your betting, sir, if you like, but there is one against disturbing the gentlemen who honor me by coming here for an off-hour."

"And you—art a chief of chiefs, gentle stranger?"

"Maybe you'll find I'm chief enough to run my own business."

"Another white feather!" groaned the missionary, clapping a hand to his brow as he staggered back, seemingly overcome by rapidly accumulating misfortunes. "Yet one more vain hope gone glimmering down the aisle of degenerating time! Oh, for the good old days gone by, when a sport was worthy the title! When no cruel he in raiment of brief authority, cared or dared to clap the kibosh on a sport who was out on the lose, with his tongue fresh oiled, and money in his kicks to back up his preaching!"

"Will you simmer down, my friend?" sternly demanded Ferguson, his eyes beginning to glow, as he gave a barely perceptible nod toward a burly, bruised-faced personage who was eagerly watching their actions. "Must I throw you out, or not?"

"Don't be too hard on him, sir," said Peter Marlow, in an undertone. "He's a bit too full for prudence, but he means no harm. I can manage him, I reckon, if—"

"Manage? Time was when no management was required! Time was when every man was a law unto himself. Then I was young, and in my prime! Oh, for those halcyon days to be born again! Then a sport could turn his own mother's funeral into a horse-race, and never another soul dared say him nay! Then—"

"That's enough, and out you go!" viciously growled Ferguson, making a grasp at the lamenting preacher with both hands.

But his calculations hardly proved correct. Just how it was done, even David Ferguson could never fairly explain, but there was a swift flashing in the gaslights, and the burly gambler gave a snarling curse of angry bewilderment as he found his wrists clasped with handcuffs!

"Mind the thug!" sharply warned Marlow, as he himself sprung into quick action.

"Augh, ye divil!" cried Tim Dooley, springing forward to assault the man who had so easily defeated him a few days before. "Now Oi hev got yez, begorra!"

"Right in the muzzle, then, Irish!" retorted Kasson, as he nimbly dodged that bull-like rush, at the same time striking hard and sure with a billy. "Lie down, and forget yourself, Tim Dooley!"

David Ferguson, as soon as he could fairly realize his captivity, uttered a wild cry for help, and too greatly excited to count the cost, his allies made the attempt to rescue him.

Prince Hamilton, savagely hot against the man whom he now felt was his evil genius, snatched forth a revolver as he sprung forward, but he was given no chance to make use of the deadly weapon.

Peter Marlow deftly tripped him up, hand

aiding foot, and in less than a score of seconds, the chief conspirator was ironed, lying half-stunned on the floor, a heavy foot planted upon his back and holding him helpless, while the detective gripped a revolver in each hand and covered the startled witnesses.

"Steady, all!" his voice rung forth sharply. "We're officers of the law, and have warrants to arrest or kill! Hands up, James Walker!"

"Guard the doors, gentlemen!" added Kent Kasson, as his quota. "If you'll take the trouble to look, friends, you'll see that escape for any of you is out of the question."

And so it was. As though they had been lying in wait for that moment, a strong force of police blocked the passage-way.

The trap was sprung, and of the entire league, only Mattie Ferguson was lacking, and she had already been accounted for.

Hamilton, Ferguson, Walker and Tim Dooley were taken away in irons, and safely "jugged."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE PREACHER SPORT UNMASKS.

"CAN'T you simmer down a bit, boy?"

"I might, if I tried right hard, but—what are you trying to get through you, anyway, Mr. Todd?"

Barry Nash asked that question in a half-angry, half-puzzled mood, which was by no means lightened by the grim chuckle which broke from the lips of the bachelor sport.

Martin Todd had met Barry Nash at the door of Ferguson's, immediately after that sensational arrest, and locking arms with the young sport, insisted on his accompanying him to his chambers. Once there, Todd had locked the door, and kept the key in his pocket ever since.

He produced liquors and cigars, insisting on Nash's joining him for a certain length of time.

"When that grace expires, I'll let you into the whole secret, my dear boy," he declared, by way of making his peace. "You've been hammering at me long enough aenent Kent Kasson and our gallant Unknown. I'll introduce you to both, and that this identical night, but only on condition that you bide my time."

That time had expired, said Todd, after consulting his watch, and with locked arms the twain were walking briskly along, heading up town.

"Simply obeying orders, my dear lad, and and if you are really anxious to have the whole truth laid bare, you'll come with me in blind faith."

"I'm coming, aren't I? Only—where to?"

"Do you see yonder palatial mansion, through the windows of which bright lights are gleaming, and—"

"Get out! That's our house, man!"

"Well, isn't that as good a spot for taking a bit of rest as any other, my son? Have you any serious objections to—I say, hold on!"

Barry Nash jerked his arm free, and sprung ahead, leaving Martin Todd to follow on as best he might. He paid no attention to that warning cry, but entered the building, to stop short at the open door of the parlor, surprised and not a little bewildered at what met his eyes.

Ilda, blushing brightly, sprung forward and caught his hand, hurriedly murmuring:

"Be good—really good, dear brother!"

Before Nash could reply, or ask a single question, Martin Todd came rushing in, to grasp his arm with the triumphant ejaculation:

"No you don't, my boy! I'm to give you the knock-down, and here goes! Forward, march!"

Half-pushing, half-dragging the surprised man forward, Todd brought him up all-standing, in front of a tall, good-looking stranger, who rose to his feet with a slightly embarrassed smile on his face.

"Permit, me, Barry! Mr. Kent Kasson, Barry Nash—know each other!"

"Kent—but you're not—"

"I was, Mr. Nash, but now I'm Clark Thurston," pleasantly declared the young gentleman, gripping his hand with a warmth hardly to be expected in an entire stranger. "Will you permit me to explain?"

"I only wish you would!"

Clark Thurston, as he gave his name, was willing enough to give that explanation, but a lack of space will not admit of a literal record of all that was said and done before everything was made clear.

Enough that Clark Thurston was he who had played the role of the Preacher Sport, as placed upon record in these pages. That the major part of the story he had told concerning his past, so far as it related to the friendship existing between the two families, was simple truth; the elders had been close friends and associates, until Norman Nash left his Eastern home, to seek fortune in the growing West.

There was one point in his explanation at which Ilda lowered her eyes and blushed even more rosily than before: the part which related to her first meeting and acquaintance with Clark Thurston.

That took place while she was at school, but

the acquaintance had been kept secret through the urgent wish of the gentleman, who begged a short grace, explaining his action and request by laying bare a hidden page in her father's past.

Just before Norman Nash turned his face toward the setting sun, he had quarreled bitterly with Henry Thurston, and from that hour all communications had ceased between the former warm friends. Both were to blame, as Clark admitted, but he told how stern and unforgiving Norman Nash had been pictured to him by his father, and he feared lest that quarrel had been bequeathed to his children.

"While trying to learn more about your affairs—for which impertinence I humbly beg your pardon, Mr. Nash—I chanced on other information, which led me to come here in disguise. I learned that a league was formed to effect your ruin, and to force Miss Nash into wedding Prince Hamilton, alias Alfred Mohr, a fugitive from justice."

Thurston went on to describe his actions, his reasons for so acting, at length.

He had been waiting for Peter Marlow, a detective, who was to bring requisition papers for both Mohr and David Ferguson, and it was while held comparatively helpless by that necessity, that he, as Kent Kasson, had "smoked" the trick to beat Silver King.

Although not a professional jockey, he was a good driver, and by securing the change of drivers, he won the race and baffled one evil scheme of the league.

Then a fortunate chance led to his discovering the next trick: and after satisfying Martin Todd that he could really run a first-class race at one hundred yards, he and Todd played the Hamilton gang yet another stunning trick.

"But—I saw you—"

"You saw Marlow, made up to represent Kasson," laughingly explained Thurston. "Luckily he isn't so much taller than I am, and by stooping his shoulders a bit more than the original, he passed safely through the ordeal without detection, thanks to the general excitement."

"But you—man alive! what can't you do, then?"

There was a short silence, then Clark Thurston moved toward Ilda, who blushed more furiously than before, but permitted him to take her hand in his, nor tried to free it as he gravely, earnestly spoke:

"There is one thing I dearly wish I might do, Mr. Nash: cement the bonds of friendship which once united our families. May I hope you will grant me a chance to do that—this way, Mr. Nash?"

"Ilda!"

"Please, brother?" faintly murmured the maiden, then withdrawing her hand to assist its mate in covering her blushing, confused, but happy face from general view.

"Say, yes, Barry Nash, or I'll—I'll marry her my own self!" cried Martin Todd, with sudden moisture coming into his honest eyes.

And so the broken bonds of friendship were united, more firmly than ever. Ilda confessed to Barry that she really loved Clark Thurston, and after reflecting over the really extraordinary services which that young gentleman had rendered him, as Kent Kasson, Nash gladly gave his consent to their union.

Martin Todd was "best man," and the bluff old sport gallantly "held his end level" throughout that ceremony.

Only himself knew what a sore pang it cost him, however. He loved Ilda, as he had never loved before, would never love again. Yet he was wise enough to see, from the very first, that his love could never be rewarded by marriage, and strong enough to hide his own hurts.

Prince Hamilton, alias Alfred Mohr, and Dave Ferguson, were taken back East by Peter Marlow, to answer for their crimes. Both were tried, found guilty, and duly sentenced to long terms in prison.

Jimmy Walker also was convicted of crime, and put behind the bars.

Tim Dooley was turned loose, since no serious crime was charged to his account, but his race proved to be a short one. He was shot and instantly killed by a man whom he attempted to "tump" in a gambling house, and his slayer was cleared on the plea of self-defense.

Tom Hinton was convicted of robbery, and is still "doing time."

Arthur Maynard recovered from his injuries, and settled down as a respectable member of society. He was advanced by the bank officials, and to-day is cashier in that same institution. He has never drank or gambled since that day, and has a good wife, a fine family of growing children, to help him keep straight.

Mattie Ferguson disappeared, no one knew whither. She was never seen in Denver after the night which witnessed the complete breaking up of the "Called Six."

Peter Marlow is still in harness, and once in a while he and "Kent Kasson" come together, when they are sure to talk over the "Double Deal at Denver."

THE END.

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